Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society Vol. 66 No. 2 2022

Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

About the Covers

Reproduced on *Bandwagon's* cover is a decorative lithograph printed by Strobridge in 1896. The Silbons had already been performing for two decades and Walter Silbon, who headed the troupe, was among the top flyers in the world in the 1890s:

> "Nearly 8,000 people were grievously disappointed at Madison Square Garden last night at the circus [Barnum & Bailey]… the aerial feat of turning three somersaults, performed by Walter Silborn [sic], was an act of marvelous daring…a number of men had been killed while attempting to do it… when Silborn climbed to his perch among the gas jets and prepared himself for the perilous attempt, the silence could almost be felt…Then he let go and fell downward, turning as he went – once, twice, thrice, striking upon his back in the net… as he bounded into the air and fell back apparently lifeless, shrieks from hundreds of female throats were smothered as he instantly arose, bowed politely and jumped to the ground. A disappointed woman in a box exclaimed: 'Well, I don't care! I shall come here every night! He's sure to kill himself before the week is over!' "[1]

Eddie, Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Silbon and Walter, 1880.

Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Hist. Soc.

The Flying Silbons began as child acrobats and gymnasts working with their father, Cornelius, as early as 1870. Little Walter appeared as a clown that year and also began working on the trapeze. He first performed on the "Flying Trapeze" with his older brother, Alfred, in 1874.[2] Walter was nine years old.[3] The boys' sister, Kate, joined the act the next year.

Walter Silbon completed a double back somersault in the family act at the Paris Hippodrome in 1879, attaining widespread acclaim for the feat.[4] However, his very first "double" was achieved earlier on November 12, 1877 at Keith Circus in Southport, England. It was there that he connected "a genuine Double Somersault (from a Flying Bar) from his hands, and was caught hand to hand by Mr. C. Silbon."[5] Twelve-year-old Walter had joined a select group of double-somersaulting aerialists and leaped to the forefront of flying act history.

Over the next 25 years, the Silbons traveled throughout the world, initially headlining shows in European capitals including Copenhagen, Madrid and Berlin. They came to the United States in 1882 appearing with Adam Forepaugh's circus for three seasons. By then, Alfred had left the act due to an injury.[6]

When the Silbons were on W. W. Cole in 1886, the troupe consisted of Cornelius, Kate, Walter, Charles and Eddie.[7] The same group was with Barnum & London in 1887. The next year, Walter Silbon – at least on one occasion – was said to have accomplished a quadruple somersault into the net.[8]

Eddie, the youngest of the brothers, left the act in 1889 when the rest of the family departed for Australia to join Sells Bros. While touring in Australia, Walter was frequently singled out in newspaper reports for his double somersaults and daring dives into the net, but he also received widespread coverage when he was hurt in a non-performing accident. On April 26, 1892, the second section of the Sells Bros. train was slowly rounding a curve in New South Wales when its last sleeping car was "dashed into by the engine of the third section."[9] Although Walter injured his shoulder and hand, he did not stop performing.

After "Corney" died in 1891,[10] Walter took charge. He hired Tom Herbert as a new catcher, and Tom became part of the family when he and Kate were married. Back in the United States, the Silbons continued with Sells Bros. They moved to Barnum & Bailey in 1893 and were back with *The Greatest Show on Earth* in 1896, remaining with the show for many years. Walter Silbon – one of the greats of early circus flying – died on July 24, 1903.

1. "Excitement at the Circus," *Morning Advertiser* (New York), Mar. 28, 1893, John M. Kelly Papers, Barnum & Bailey scrapbook 1892-1893, Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society.
2. *The Era* (London, England), Apr. 12, 1874, p. 14.
3. "Deaths in the Profession," *The New York Clipper,* Aug. 22, 1903, p. 610. Walter Silbon was born in February 1865 in Hull, England at the family home on Mason Street.
4. *The Era* (London, England), May 11, 1879, p. 17, and *Western Mail* (Cardiff, Wales), Nov. 17, 1879, p. 3.
5. *The Era* (London, England), Dec. 2, 1877, p. 17. Each member of the circus company signed a statement in testament to the achievement.
6. Steve Gossard, *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance,* self-published, 1991, p. 105.
7. *The Topeka Daily Press* (Kansas), May 10, 1886, p. 1.
8. *Los Angeles Herald,* Sept. 13, 1888, p. 1.
9. *Hull Daily Mail* (Hull, England), Jun. 8, 1892, p. 4.
10. "Deaths in the Profession," op. cit.

The vibrant poster on the back cover was created for the first appearance of the Flying Codonas at Circus Renz in Vienna, Austria. The poster proclaims the legendary aerialists as the "heroes of the [German] film *Variete*" (1925) and the circus "artists in *The 4 Devils*" (1928). The image on the poster dates the piece as just after 1932 when the Codonas starred in an MGM short documentary called *Swing High.* The evidence for this is the rendering of the trio – Lalo, Alfredo and Vera Bruce – which was styled after still photography taken during the filming. GTP

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Editors

Greg Parkinson, Editor
parkinsonUSA@yahoo.com

Chris Berry, Associate Editor

John Wells
Mardi Wells
Howard Pace
Tom Pallone
— Design, layout & publishing

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Circus Historical Society
P.O. Box 644
Stratford CT 06615

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An index of *Bandwagon* articles from earlier issues is available online at www.circushistory.org. Back issues are available from the Office of Publication.

From the Editor

One of the joys of directing big top performances at Circus World Museum for many years was the supplemental benefit of becoming acquainted with highly-skilled circus artists from around the world, as well as show owners and other directors. In a similar fashion, working on the Circus Historical Society's journal has introduced me to nomadic troupers of the past who made their mark on circus history, many of which I had not previously known of or had not known of their extraordinary accomplishments. The content presented in this issue of *Bandwagon* is a case in point.

Steve Gossard's observations and stories about the flyers depicted on the circus posters we have selected to share with readers deliver a fascinating chronicle of the aerial artform. His summaries also document the earliest known double, triple and quadruple somersaults among other heroic maneuvers, and – hold on to your hat – he presents evidence that Jules Leotard may not have been the first to leap from one trapeze to another!

My eyes never saw Miss Loni perform in person, but Tim Tegge brings to life her skills, charm and flair through his review of the Dutch foot juggler's circus career. The article also sheds light on the close rapport Loni Abeen had with the eminent Hollywood director Cecil B. DeMille and circus immortals like Jackie LeClaire.

I thought I had a fairly good grasp of the history of Peru, Indiana and the array of circuses that made their winter homes there. However, Bob Cline's article provided new insights, particularly on the achievements of Ben Wallace, as well as the development of the American Circus Corporation winter quarters facilities throughout the Roaring Twenties.

For over 50 years, the three Huling Brothers – Frank, Mark, and Ray – and their trained sea lions delighted circus audiences around the world. Gary Bohan, Jr., whose great grandfather was one of the brothers, tells the Huling story, from their rapid rise to fame to the final performance of one of their treasured sea lions.

As Lane Talburt's series about John Pugh continues, we learn more about how this young English acrobat rose to become the manager and eventually the owner of one of America's largest-ever truck circuses. We also get to know something further about Johnny's dedication to touring under canvas and including animal acts in his shows.

In closing this introduction to our latest look back upon the stars and highlights of circus history, I point readers to Jennifer Lemmer Posey's tribute to Howard Tibbals. Thanks to Howard's passion and generosity, millions of people have and will continue to learn of the magnitude and magic of *The Greatest Show on Earth* during its under-canvas years. Howard was a highly-skilled artist and in his own way, a circus owner. It was my good fortune to have met him some 40 years ago. Howard's incomparable miniature creation, his vast circus collection and the many other gifts he and his wife, Janice, have bestowed to The Ringling will help keep the circus of yesterday alive for generations to come.

We hope you find enjoyment in the pages that follow and along the way learn something anew of the people and stories of circus days gone by.

Circus Historical Society

circushistory.org

Mission Statement

"To preserve, promote, and share through education the history and cultural significance of the circus and allied arts, past and present."

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The Return of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey

by Chris Berry

If all goes as planned, circus history will be made in the fall of 2023. On May 18, five years after the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Blue Unit gave its final performance, Feld Entertainment announced that *The Greatest Show on Earth* is preparing to reclaim its place in American culture.

"It is like getting a shot of adrenaline every day," Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Kenneth Feld told *Bandwagon*.[1]

Although the re-energized circus will not travel by train, and wild animals will not be on the program, Feld promised that the performance will feature extraordinary acts. "I will guarantee that people will say it is *The Greatest Show on Earth*," he said, adding, "but it will be a different type of show because we are living in a different time and place."

An Argentinian troupe, Argendance, performs Boleadoras at the Ringling Live Auditions World Tour in Buenos Aires.

Feld Entertainment

Feld said those differences were underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic which he called the biggest challenge of his career, drawing comparisons to the decision by John, Charles and Alf T. Ringling to combine Barnum & Bailey with Ringling Bros. during the Spanish Influenza pandemic of 1918. "As a result, it gave them more life than they had before, and in many ways we are doing the same thing. They reinvented what they did, and we reinvented what we are doing and how we are doing it."

Part of that required a new strategy to reflect the evolving audience. "From the moment we made the announcement [in 2017 that the circus would be closing], we were thinking about how we could change the business model and bring Ringling back in a great way."

That re-engineered business model will include brand extension into possible theme park attractions, touring exhibitions and connecting with youth circus programs. Like other Feld productions, the new show is expected to travel by trucks and appear at many of the same arenas where the circus appeared prior to 2017.

After a five-year hiatus of scouting for talent, the show also had to find unusual new acts. Veteran casting director Giulo Scatola has auditioned performers around the world, including sessions in Paris, Las Vegas, Buenos Aires, Ethiopia and Mongolia.

Feld said it is those memorable acts that will connect a new generation of circus fans with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.

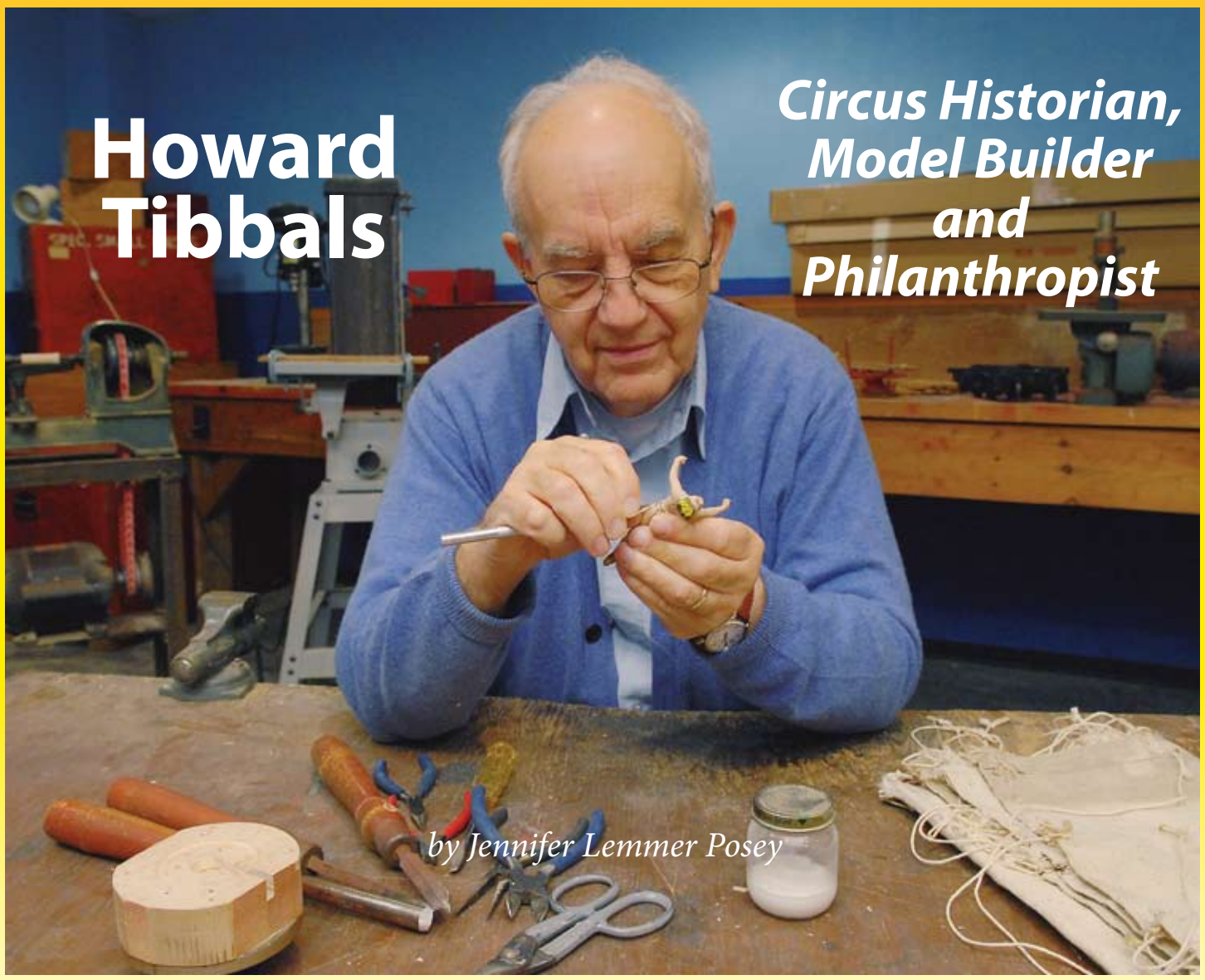
"These performers do extraordinary things, risk their lives and never have a bad day," Feld said. He said that the circus is being designed to create an emotional bond between the performer and the audience. His hope is that those in attendance will then have a greater appreciation for their skills.

With the inaugural performance more than a year in the future, the new circus is still in its earliest stage of development. "Every day when I come in and we talk more about it, the ultimate vision becomes clearer," he said. "We are going to have the best of the best."

1. Kenneth Feld, Interview with the Author, May 16, 2022.

An Ethiopian troupe performs a banquine acrobatic act during auditions in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Feld Entertainment



Howard Tibbals

Circus Historian, Model Builder and Philanthropist

by Jennifer Lemmer Posey

Howard Tibbals in his workshop at The Ringling Museum, c.2010.

All images courtesy of The Ringling

Imagine a 10,000 square foot room filled with 8,000 circus posters, hundreds of route books and booklets, thousands of programs, heralds, window cards, couriers, and maybe a million photographs. A room where the scrapbook for Rosa Richter, better known as human canonball Zazel, is shelved alongside a photograph album chronicling the Barnum & Bailey tour of Europe and a set of albums filled with photos of the Sarasota winter quarters taken by aerialist Dick Anderson in the 1940s. Where epaulets belonging to General Tom Thumb are stored a few feet away from gloves worn by aerialist Lillian Leitzel. It is difficult to imagine a space more filled with potential – the extraordinary history of the circus safely tucked away in archival boxes and flat files thanks largely to the lifelong efforts of one man.

Howard Tibbals passed away in March, leaving an extraordinary legacy shaped by his love for the circus. His mother noted in Howard's baby book that he attended his first circus at the age of three. The Ringling show played Pittsburgh in early June of 1940 and the Cole Bros. show also played early summer dates in the area. But even more formative was Howard's experience a few years later, when his grandfather took him to see the unloading of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Howard remembered spending the rest of the day watching the setup of the circus lot through binoculars from the hilltop near his grandparents' West Virginia home. He recalled watching the entire experience of circus day from that distance, seeing "…the great circus display unfold and pack so meticulously back into the wagons, re-load on the railroad trains, and move on to the next town." Howard promptly began "playing circus," using scraps found in his grandmother's rag bin to create a big top.

Although Howard had early memories of the circus, his first relationship to sawdust was through the family flooring business. Howard Charles Tibbals was born August 10, 1936, in West Virginia to Charles and Lillian Tibbals. In 1946 the

By the age of twelve, Howard was already building ambitious circus models.

family moved to Oneida, Tennessee where Charles established the Tibbals Flooring Company in partnership with his brother Todd. After receiving a degree in engineering from North Carolina State University, Howard joined the family business, working alongside his father in the development of patented methods for manufacturing parquet floors and the founding of the Hardwood Tile Company – Hartco for short. The flooring plant was the largest employer in Scott County, Tennessee for almost three decades. Ready to dedicate his time to his passion, Howard sold the flooring business to Premark International in 1988, shortly after the death of his father.

In 1956, as a freshman in college, Howard began work on what is today known as the *Howard Bros. Circus Model.* His sharp mind for engineering was inspired by a 1952 article in *Popular Mechanics* entitled "Here Comes the Circus." The article combined with the acquaintance of circus model builder Harold Dunn were important influences that turned Howard's childhood play into the serious pursuit of creating a detailed and historically accurate ¾″ scale model of the tented Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus of the early 20th century.

When asked about the name of his model circus, Howard would recount a letter he wrote to the Ringling show in the early years of his model building. Perhaps inspired by knowledge from his family business, Howard wrote the management of his intention to build the model based on the show and asked permission to use the Ringling title on the model pieces. The response he received welcomed him to base his model making on the specifics of the Ringling circus but requested that he not make use of the carefully protected title. Knowing that many of the most successful circuses involved families, Howard chose to add the term Bros. to his own name for the model. In later years he would joke that the response saved him years of time since his title was significantly shorter than Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows.

Taking to heart Dunn's advice that he focus on building one department at a time, Howard dedicated 18 years to creating the big top and all of its equipment and associated wagons. He then branched out methodically building all of the major tents of the circus lot and their associated equipment.

In 1973 Howard raised the big top at his home in Oneida, Tennessee.

10 SHOWS IN ONE COMBINED
THE GREAT LONDON CIRCUS
SANGER'S ROYAL BRITISH MENAGERIE.
10 TENTS ONE TICKET CONSOLIDATED
AN ARTIFICIAL SUN MAKING NIGHT AS BRIGHT AS DAY.
COST US $15,000.00
OUR ELECTRIC LIGHT.
BRILLIANT AS THE NOONDAY SUN
18 ELECTRIC CHANDELIERS EQUAL TO 35,000 GAS JETS.
PROF. M. E. SHERMAN, B. D. E. L.
THIS ENGINE & BOILER WAS BUILT EXPRESSLY FOR US BY THE FITCHBURG STEAM ENGINE CO. FITCHBURG, MASS.
CONSOLIDATION WITH THE COOPER, BAILEY & CO'S GREAT INTERNATIONAL ALLIED SHOWS

This poster advertising The Great London Circus electric light plant helped convince Florida State University President D'Alemberte of the importance of circus history.

The first public display of the *Howard Bros. Circus* was at the public library in Howard's hometown of Oneida in the late 1970s. For more than 66 years, Howard devoted at least 20 hours a week to building pieces for the model. Today the *Howard Bros. Circus* includes 162 wagons and tens of thousands of other pieces.

Every element of the model was created with attention to the smallest details, relying on photographs, plans, written descriptions, and whenever possible, firsthand information. He spent time visiting the old Sarasota winter quarters property with Harold

The Howard Bros. Circus arrived at The Ringling in 2005 packed up just like the real circus.

Dunn to measure wagons and met with members of the local circus community.

Howard was always delighted to spend time with anyone who could hold a good conversation about the circus, especially when he might glean something special to enhance his model. He frequently shared his memory of a bus ride during a Circus Fans gathering in the 1970s when he managed to sit beside former equestrienne star May Wirth. Howard hoped to get specific information about her experiences on the circus lot, especially about her private tent. Wirth, who would have been around 80 at the time, did not recall the kind of sharp details that a model builder might have been after. She did remember that her pet parrot was frequently with her on the lot and that, along with the benefit of a private tent, she received two buckets of water every day – allowing her to wash her hair. These details, which paint a picture of the unique experiences of the traveling community, were incorporated into the model.

As he traveled for business, Howard also took advantage of opportunities to meet with knowledgeable circus historians. One of Howard's most treasured memories was his first visit with Fred Pfening, Jr. in Columbus, Ohio. Howard was invited into the Pfening home and allowed to sort through a collection of black and white photographs of the Ringling show. He sorted out the duplicates into a separate stack, which Pfening kindly gave to him at the end of the day. For Howard, that group of photographs was one of his first steps in becoming a true collector of circus history.

In 1959 Howard joined the Circus Historical Society becoming member number 848. He relied on the community for a diverse range of knowledge to inform his model building. Along with the Pfening family, circus historians Robert MacDougall, Fred Dahlinger, Richard Reynolds, Stuart Thayer, Jim and Millicent Dunwoody, the Parkinson family and many others became lifelong friends.

As the model gained renown, Howard welcomed opportunities to share it with the public. The first large exhibition of the model was at the 1982 World's Fair in Knoxville, Tennessee. Howard, accompanied by his mentor Harold Dunn was at the Fair daily, building model pieces while visitors walked around the model table and viewed posters and photographic enlargements that conveyed the massive scale and visual impact of the tented circus. Over the years, as it continued to grow, the *Howard Bros. Circus Model* was shown at The National Geographic Society's Explorer Hall in Washington, D.C. in 1985-1986; The Museum of Science in Rochester, New York in 1987; The Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan in 1988; Circus World Museum in Baraboo,

HOWARD BROS. CIRCUS
Logistical complexity inspired Howard Tibbals to create the most accurate replica of the colossal canvas city. Modeled
HOWARD BROTHERS WORLDS FINEST SHOWS
No 3

Howard and Janice Tibbals with one of the miniature advertising cars in 2018.

The Howard Bros. Circus Model in 2005.

Wisconsin in 1988-1990; The Knoxville Museum of Art in 1993; and the Cincinnati Museum of History in 1995.

While Howard had been actively collecting photographs, programs, and the easily available ephemera such as letterhead, tickets and window cards, it was not until the late1980s that his dedication as a collector began to match the passion he had developed for model building. He bought Harold Dunn's circus collection around that time, acquiring in one move hundreds of extraordinary and rare posters, heralds, couriers, and much more. Through auctions and relations with private dealers and collectors, the Tibbals collection grew to be one of the largest private circus collections in the world, with materials representing the international influence of the circus arts. Howard modified the basement of his Tennessee home and added flat files and other storage, as well as controls to assure consistent temperature and humidity in order to store the collection in museum-like conditions.

Howard Tibbals envisioned assuring the lasting impact of his collection by establishing a center for the study of the circus. In the 1990s as he began considering options for a permanent home for the *Howard Bros. Circus Model* and the associated collections, Howard was drawn to The John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art. He and his second wife, Janice, had a second home in Sarasota and had a long relationship with the museum through friends including Jack Lentz and his wife Evi Kelly Lentz. Concerned about assuring the museum's long-term capacity to care for his collections, Howard joined the Board of Trustees and was an important part of the leadership team that helped guide the transition as The Ringling moved under the management of Florida State University.

In 2000, Mr. Tibbals and his wife Janice welcomed Florida State University President Sandy D'Alemberte to their home in Tennessee. During that visit, Mr. Tibbals spoke of the tremendous cultural impact of the circus in America. He shared a poster printed in 1879 to advertise a circus's latest feature – electric light. For many Americans, their first experience of electric light happened under the big top. Howard's knowledge about the impact of the circus on American culture inspired D'Alemberte. Their conversation resulted in a proposal for the Tibbals Learning Center at The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art – a showcase of circus history to celebrate and preserve the cultural contributions of the circus arts.

As the lead donors for the Learning Center, Howard and Janice Tibbals donated $6.5 million towards construction and an endowment. In 2008, the Tibbals made an additional

gift of $4 million towards the construction of an extension to the center, adding exhibition galleries, collection storage spaces, and an archive reading room. Today, the Tibbals Endowment provides funds for the care of collections, staffing, and programming of the Circus Museum.

Howard collaborated with Deborah Walk, Curator of Circus at The Ringling, and other museum staff in the plans for the Tibbals Learning Center. Every aspect of the building was carefully designed to assure the care of the collections and to create adaptable gallery spaces that encourage visitors to explore the rich history of the circus. At the heart of the building is the *Howard Bros. Circus Model.*

Following two years of constructions, in 2004 Howard Tibbals, with his wife Janice and a dedicated team of volunteers, began the installation of the model in its final home as the featured exhibit in the Tibbals Learning Center at The Ringling in Sarasota, Florida. The miniature arrived on the 3,800 square foot tabletop in fully loaded wagons, just like the real show. The only equipment that could not pack up like the full-sized circus was the canvas because the thickness of the fabric could not be scaled down to 1/16 life size.

As the miniature circus lot rose, using perhaps as many man-hours as the real traveling show once did, museum staff documented each piece before it was placed on the table. In the process of setting up the model, Howard had assistance from Don and Carolyn McGarvey, Pete and Shirley Adams, Paul Ingrassia, and Dale and Evelyn Riker. David Duncan designed the scenic Knoxville backdrop for the railroad yard and assisted with many of the additions to the model over the years. After the public opening in January of 2006, Howard continued adding to the model. The last wagon was added in April of 2021. Fittingly, the wagon is the miniature version of the small wagon used to carry the smudge pots that lit the path between the circus lot and the railroad yard. It was the last wagon to leave each lot.

Howard passed away peacefully at his home in Sarasota in March of this year. He is survived by his wife Janice and their combined family.

The study of circus history has been transformed by Howard's contributions. The Tibbals Circus Collection at The Ringling includes photographs, posters and other advertising materials, programs, scrapbooks, correspondence, design drawings, costumes, and props as well as more than two thousand books related to the circus. This unparalleled collection, now held at The Ringling, documents all aspects of the circus and allied arts including Wild West, side show, and other travelling entertainments from American and abroad. *The Howard Bros. Circus Model* brings to life an era that will never be seen again and helps new generations fall in love with the magic of the tented circus. Howard's investment in preserving circus history assures that the conversation about the contributions of the circus to broader cultural and social trends can be plumbed for new insights with every new generation. Bw

The Howard Bros. Circus features 162 wagons crafted by Howard Tibbals in historically accurate detail.

A Crash Course in Circus

The first time I met Howard Tibbals he asked me to draw him a clown. I was fresh out of a graduate program in art history and knew almost nothing about the circus, but knew enough to humor the somewhat intimidating man in front of me. It was a terrible drawing, but I suppose it was proof enough that I was willing to try to meet his expectations.

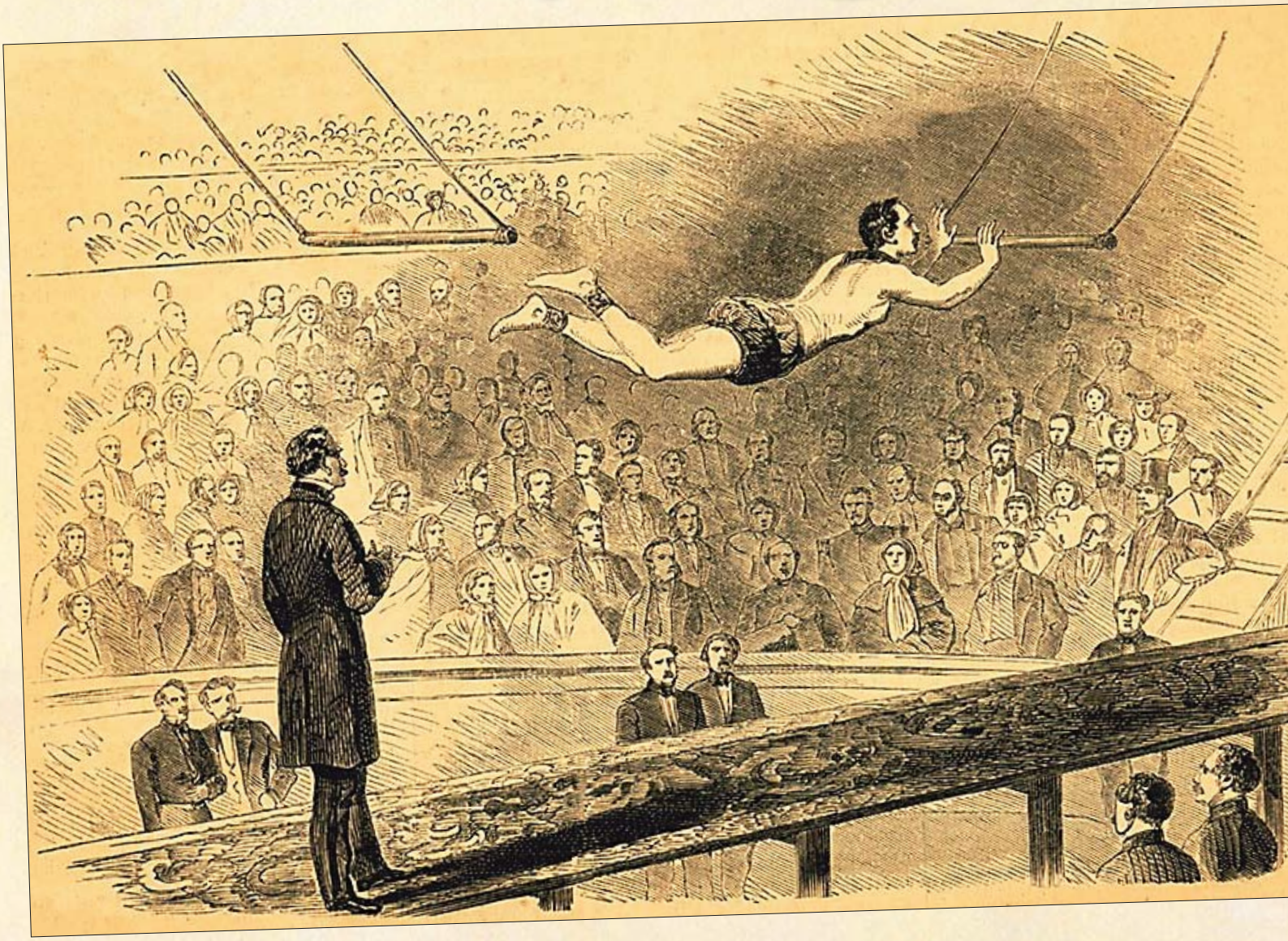
The next encounter was in his home in Eastern Tennessee, where Howard was busy in his basement workshop making miniature tent stakes. Never one to cut corners, he had ripped down a 2 x 4″ into narrow strips and then routed those strips into long dowels, cut each to length and then hand sharpened the points.

We spent the afternoon flipping through posters in his collection. I've spent the 20 years since then learning so much of what I know from the collections I assembled, the people he introduced me to, and, of course, from Howard himself. I can think of no better way to learn about the history of the circus than from someone whose passion for it shines through. To me that is Howard's legacy and the charge he leaves to all of us who are part of the CHS community – to encourage new minds and new approaches and to give the resources so that the work they do can be accurate and impactful.

Jennifer Lemmer Posey

by Steve Gossard

Flying Act



Jules Leotard

Prior to 1859, trapeze performance was limited to single or double trapeze acts, acts in which one or two gymnasts posed on a single bar or dropped from one trapeze to another. Jules Leotard has been traditionally credited with the invention of the flying trapeze act; a "flying" act is defined as a horizontal leap in an unsupported movement from one device to another. At that point in history this spectacle was considered to be sensational in the extreme.

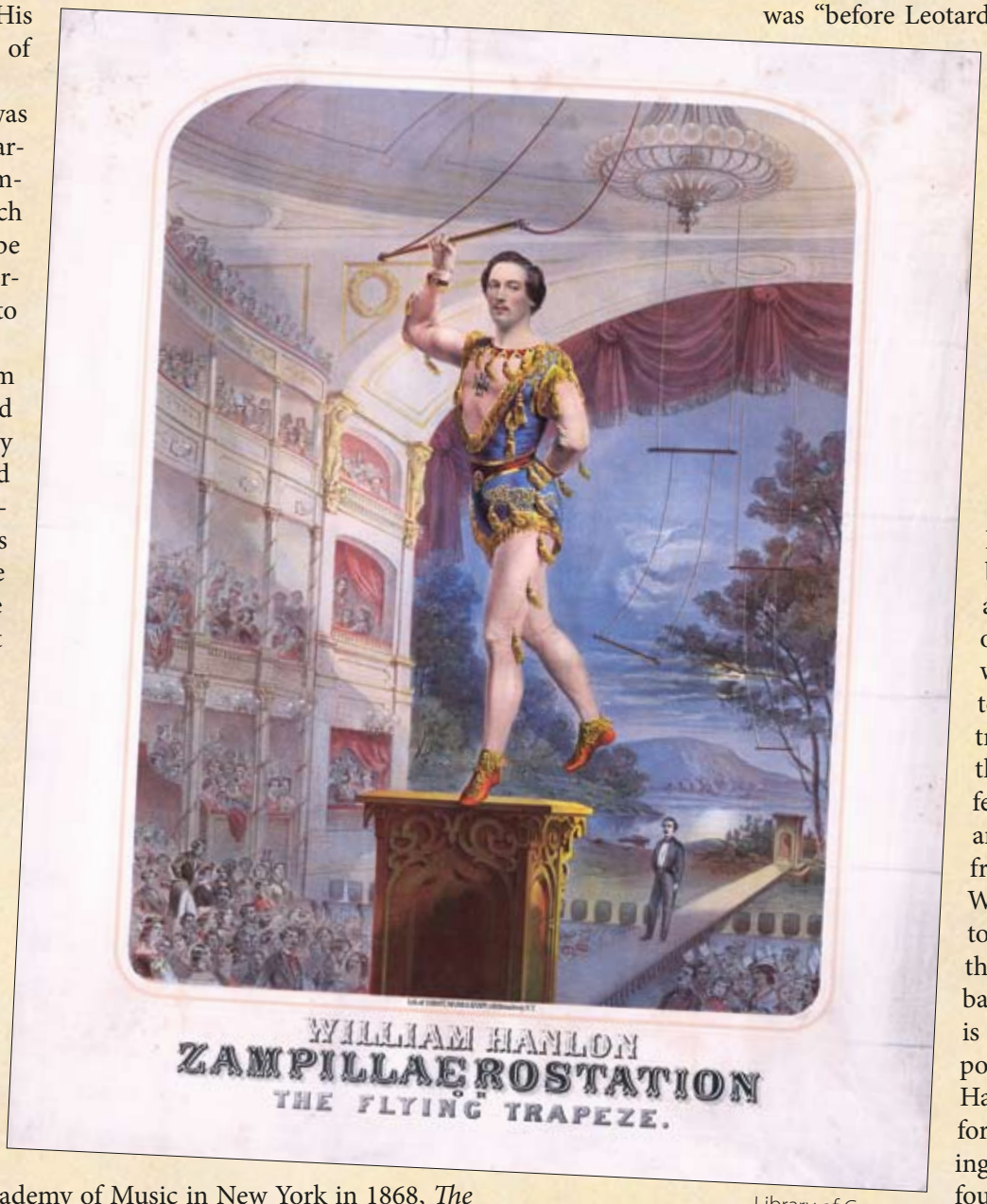
Jules Leotard perfected the art of swinging from bar to bar in his father's gymnasium in Toulouse, France by practicing tricks over a swimming bath. He was invited to perform at the Cirque Napoleon in Paris, and made his debut November 12, 1859. During his career, it was said that he performed with from two to five trapezes at a time, swinging and performing tricks from one to trapeze to another. Besides being an innovator, Leotard was a true artist. In spite of the many aerialists who had copied his act before Leotard performed at the London Alhambra in 1866, of that appearance it was said that "the immeasurable superiority of Leotard is again asserted beyond all question," and he was "if possible, more graceful, more daring, and a more finished *artiste* than ever."

Circus Posters

Hanlon Brothers

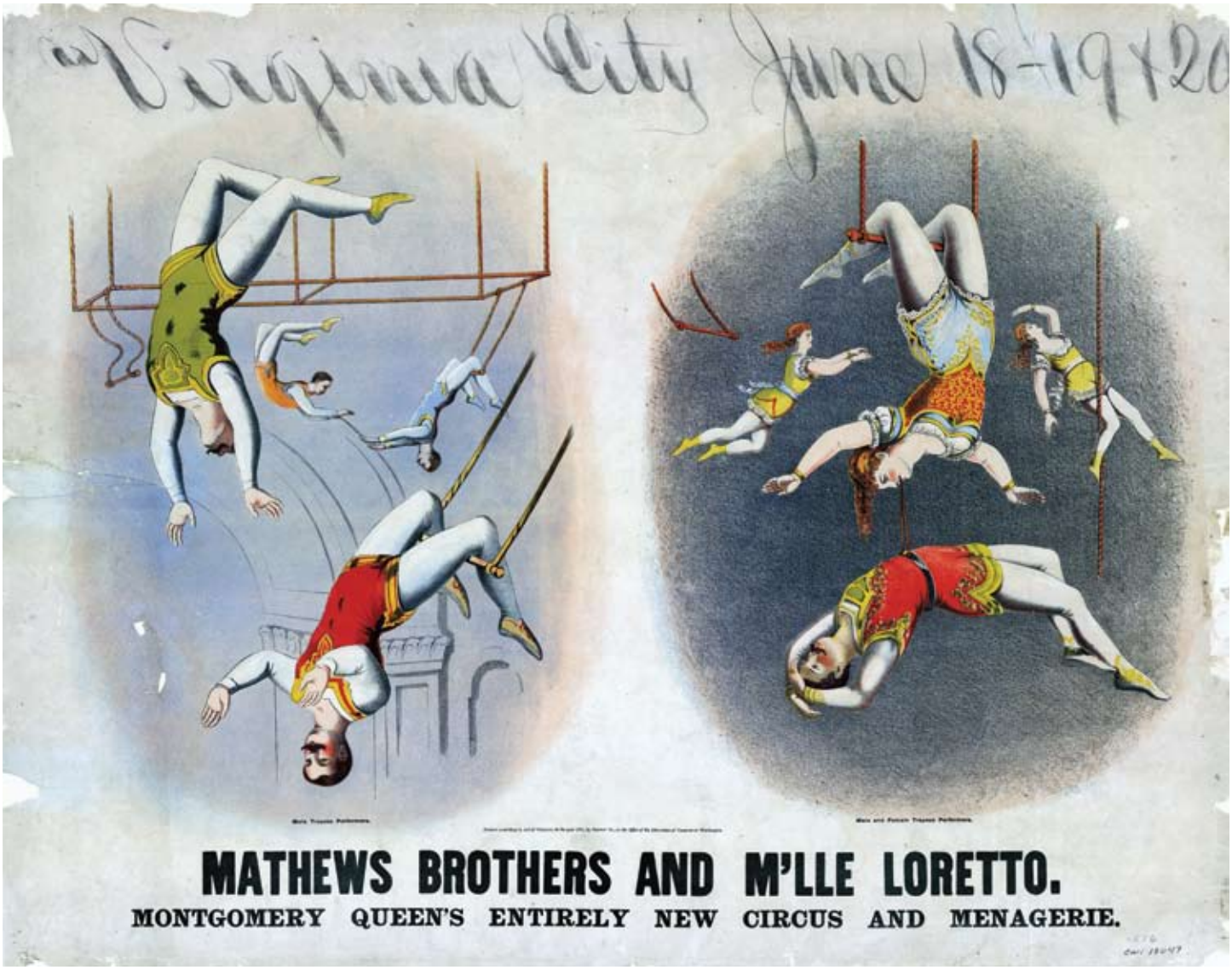
Just two years after Leotard had introduced the flying bar act in Paris, it was brought to America by the Hanlon Brothers. An advertisement in *The New York Times* December 8, 1861 announced "William Hanlon to make his First Appearance In His Unrivaled Act of Zampillaerostation." His act was described in an article dated December 13, in which he was said to be turning somersaults from bar to bar.

The term *aerostation* had been used as early as 1796 as applied to balloon ascensions. How this term came to be applied to the flying return act is a mystery. Although the credit for this invention belonged to Leotard, the introduction of the flying bar act became imprinted on the minds of many people in the entertainment field as belonging to William Hanlon. When Leotard appeared at the Academy of Music in New York in 1868, *The New York Clipper* called his act a *zampillaerostation.* In fact, William Hanlon *did* contest Leotard's claim to the invention of the flying bar act. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* reported December 14, 1861, when Hanlon performed at Niblo's Garden in New York, that his performance resembled that of Leotard, but that Hanlon's act had been performed "some six years since in Russia." The article added that this was "before Leotard ever thought of transferring the study of his gymnasium to the theatre." Furthermore, Leotard's act had been performed with two swinging bars, while Hanlon's Zampillaerostation was performed with three. The distance between Hanlon's first two bars was 50 feet, and from the second to the third was 45 feet. The total distance he traveled through the air was 140 feet including the arc of his swings from the cables, William flying up to 20 feet through the air between the bars. If this claim is true (it is very possible), William Hanlon had performed the first flying bar act in 1855 four years prior to Leotard's exploits.



Library of Congress

This poster pictures Hanlon with his flying bar act rigging, probably in Niblo's Garden in New York in 1861.



Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

Matthews Brothers

Montgomery Queen's was a west-coast circus which quartered in Hayward, California. The show boasted a large menagerie and 60 performers in 1876. That year, it was stated, they had abandoned railroad transportation, and instead traveled by wagon through the mountains.

Very little about the Matthews Brothers trapeze act has been uncovered, aside from the fact that they were listed among the performers with the Montgomery Queen Circus in 1876, when this poster was printed. In local newspaper advertisements, they were listed as the "Matthews Family," and Mlle. Loretto was not listed at all. Perhaps Mlle. Loretto was a member of the Matthews family, though in 1870 an act called "MONS. and MADAME LORETTO, Acrobatic and Musical Clowns" and "Brothers Loretto" acrobatic, French clowns were advertising in *The Era,* of London, England.

Without naming the act, a summary of Montgomery Queen's performance from *The Daily Evening Express* of Los Angeles (July 25, 1876) described:

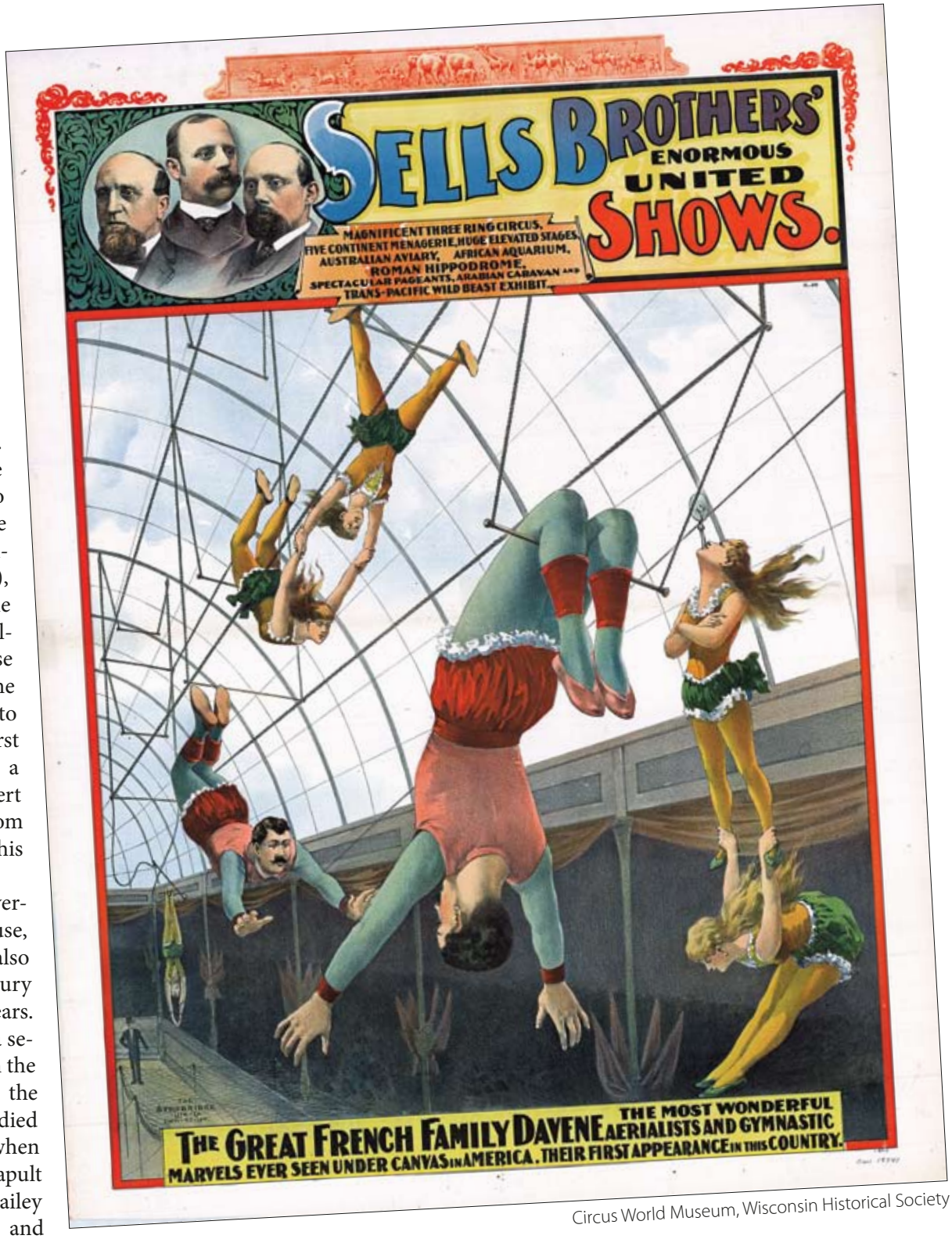
> "The trapeze performance by a lady and two lithe young men was replete with thrilling feats. The herculean lady, who whirled a couple of supernumeraries around on a bar of iron till they were drunk, and then held a large brass cannon on her shoulders, while a boy, standing on it, fired it off…"

The illustrations on this poster seem to fit this description and were likely the Loretto and the Matthews acts.

Davene Family

William Morris Davene was a talented athlete, showman and manager. His act, "The Great French Family Davene" was working in New York as early as September 1879. The personnel of the act in 1880 was listed as Wm. M. Davene and three ladies: Magerald, Lotto and Alza; but the three ladies were later identified as Elizabeth (Lizzie), Lucy and Vara. Davene was caught up in an allegation of child abuse by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children during his first year in America, and a young boy named Robert Caldwell was taken from the act and returned to his parents in England.

Besides the controversy of alleged child abuse, the Davene act was also plagued with serious injury and death in its early years. In 1880, Lucy suffered a serious near-fatal fall with the Forepaugh circus, and the following year Lizzie died of injuries suffered when she was shot from a catapult with the Barnum & Bailey show. In spite of these and other setbacks, William managed to organize a combination variety show which toured extensively from 1883 until at least 1890.



Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

In 1888, while traveling with the Robbins circus, William divorced his wife and married one of the young women in his act, Miss Vara Daborhour, some 13 years his junior who had been working as his "daughter" since the age of eight. At that time William's real name was revealed to be "Davis" and not "Davene," which raises the question of whether he was originally from France at all.

The 1893 poster pictured here provides a generic view of trapeze performance of the time. This artwork had been used the year before to picture the Silbon Family act.

The Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth
THE FLYING DILLONS
FIRST APPEARANCE IN AMERICA OF THE FAMOUS CONTINENTAL FAVORITES
IN A SERIES OF MOST MARVELOUS MID-AIR FEATS AND STARTLING PERFORMANCES.
THE WORLD'S GRANDEST, LARGEST, BEST, AMUSEMENT INSTITUTION.

Tegge Circus Archives

The Dillons

When the Flying Dillons, identified as Edwin, Ernest and Lillo, came to the United States to perform with the Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1895, they had already had a fascinating career as child performers – Lillo, Elspa and Echo appearing in England for over 20 years. Lillo and Elspa were among the youngest performers ever to have performed with a leap for life trapeze act using a flyer and a catcher, at ages seven and nine. Their father, Paul Dillon (his real name was Paul Stone), was a hotel keeper in Birmingham, England, and had once worked as a comedian. Among other tricks performed by this amazing trio in 1877, they featured "Double Drum Balloon Leaps," a 50-foot flight across the theater to a hand catch blindfolded from Lillo to Elspa, and a quadruple drop from the ceiling of the theater to the net by Elspa. Echo was described as the "funny mite" doing comedy with the act, and he "also flew fearlessly." In 1878, it was said that Lillo was nine, Elspa was eight, and Echo was five years of age. The trio became an international sensation, and by the early 1880s they had agents in England, France and Germany.

In 1884, the Dillons auditioned for an agent to perform with Barnum & Bailey, but apparently the deal fell through because Lillo (her full name was Florence May Lillo Stone) had eloped with a 21-year-old named Samuel Neale. The marriage was annulled because the couple had falsified the bride's age as well as other details. The act continued as before. In 1886, the troupe added one more performer, whom they called "Venus."

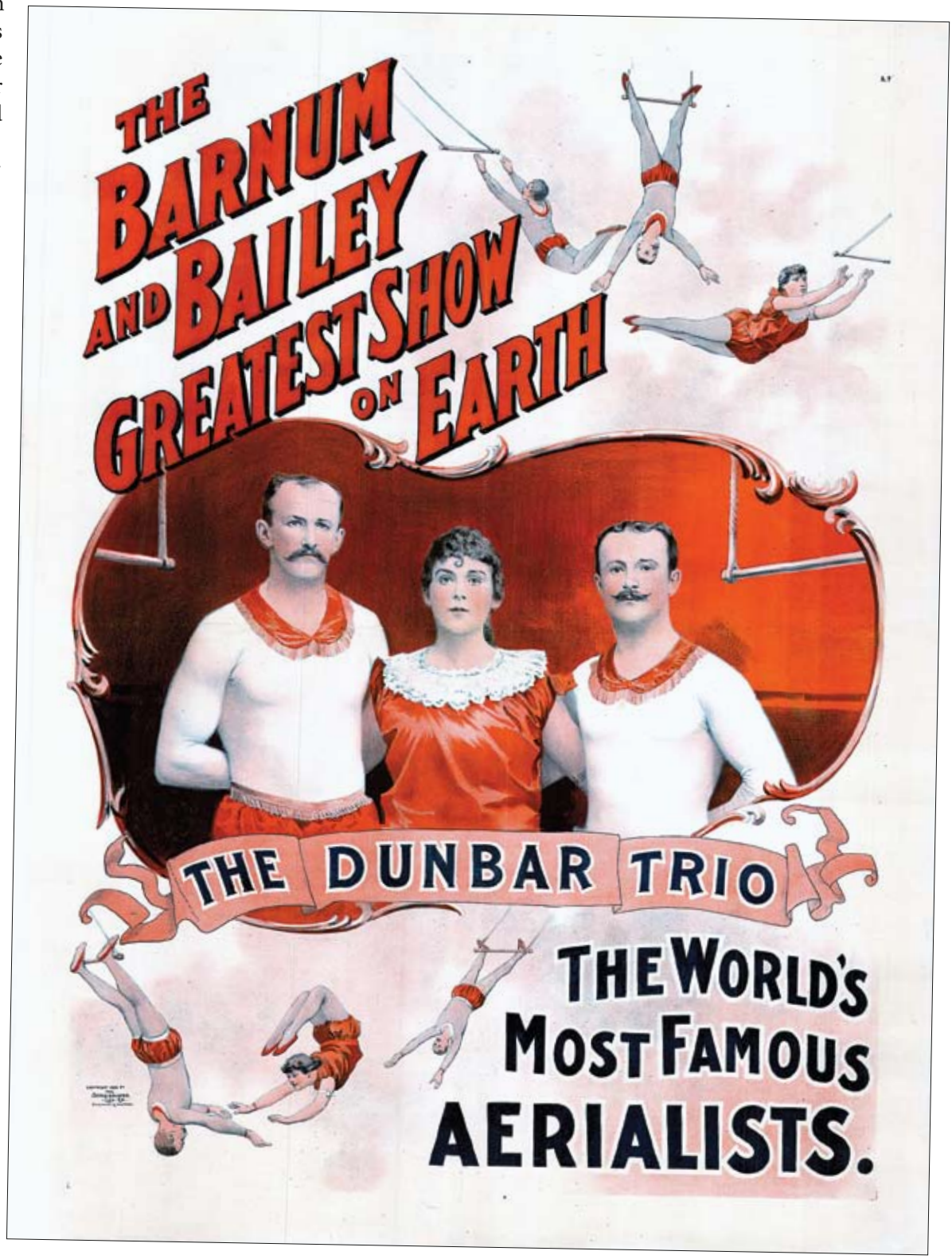
When this poster was printed in 1895, the "Flying Dillons" had come to the U. S. and were performing with the Barnum & Bailey Circus, featuring "Miss Lillo" doing a "daring performance upon the aerial bar, away up in the top of the big canvas," and also doing "a return act" with her brothers. The Dillon act returned to England after their stint with the Barnum show and were still performing as late as 1901.

Dunbar Trio

This 1895 lithograph of the Dunbar Trio is an example of how the graphic design of a poster illustrated the sort of act the public would see when they attended the circus. A significant difference between the Dunbar act and flying return acts of today is in the way the catcher hangs from the catch bar. George Dunbar was holding to the bar by his ankles, while catchers in modern times entwine their hocks (knees) in the cables with the bar across the front of their thighs. One source stated that the Dunbar Trio was made up of George Dunbar and his son and daughter, another stated that the trio was made up of George, his brother and sister.

The Dunbar's act in 1895 was described in the *Chicago Chronicle* September 8 of that year:

> "The 'return act' is the latest thing in aerial team work… The Dunbars present three swinging trapezes, occupying the full width of the arena in their act… three tall cranes are rigged, at distances of about forty feet apart. They are about thirty-five to fifty feet in height and from a cross-bar at the top of each of the cranes depends a trapeze of slender steel cable. George Dunbar, the head of the team, is the middleman, or 'carrier,' as it is called. Mons. Tardy and Miss Georgie Dunbar occupy the high trapezes at either side of the tent. From pedestals beneath their bars these two athletes swing toward the center of the tent. George Dunbar is hanging by his heels, and, just at the proper intent, the trapeze is released and the performer shoots through the air, turning somersaults, pirouettes, twisters and all sorts of springs, to be neatly and skillfully caught in the strong grasp of the 'carrier,' who meets him just at the right place."



Tegge Circus Archives

ADAM FOREPAUGH & SELLS BROTHERS
ENORMOUS SHOWS COMBINED
FIRST AMERICAN APPEARANCE OF THE FLYING WONDERS.
THE ARRIGOSI SISTERS, IN THEIR ASTONISHING HIGH TRAPEZE, LONG SKIRT EVOLUTIONS, LEAPS AND DIVES.

Tegge Circus Archives

Arrigosi Sisters

The Arrigosi (or Arrigosa) Sisters' act occupies an interesting place in the history of trapeze. Their experiment with wearing long gowns for aerial performance was advertised as a special feature of the Adam Forepaugh & Sells' Brothers Consolidated Shows in 1896, but while many sources were critical of women's costumes for revealing too much of the female form, the one brief experiment at covering the legs of women aerialists with skirts, in fact, was criticized in 1896 for aesthetic reasons. A *New York Clipper* reporter commented on their act on April 11:

> "The Arrigosa Sisters, who are doubtless skilled aerialists, hid the light of their talent under a bushel of unsuitable raiment, the result adding nothing to their past achievements. While it might be a novel sight to behold a woman doing feats upon a trapeze while dressed in long skirts, the effect is not in the least pleasing."

Their wardrobe must certainly have restricted their movements in the air.

The sisters worked in London, England at the Paragon Theatre in November of 1895 performing their signature trick of a head-first dive from the ceiling at some excessive height into the net below. They remained there for less than a week before they were apparently recruited to come to the United States. By the following May, they were touring with the Forepaugh-Sells show in Kansas. Their performances in America were described as "giant flights, dives, somersaults, catches and other feats on the aerial trapeze" and their act was touted for their unique wardrobe. "The famous Arrigosi Sisters make their first American appearance in association with the extraordinary coterie of lady performers of the Adam Forepaugh and Sells Brothers' united circuses. They are the only performers who appear in full dress and long skirts."

RINGLING BROS
WORLD'S GREATEST SHOWS
The Da Comas
THE HUMAN BIRDS. PERFORMING TERRIFIC HEADLONG DIVES. PERILOUS MID-AIR SOMERSAULTS. THRILLING LONG DISTANCE LEAPS THROUGH SPACE AT DIZZY HEIGHTS. NO OTHER EXHIBITION ON EARTH CAN PRODUCE THEIR EQUALS

The Ringling, Tibbals Circus Collection

The Da Comas

The Da Coma flying act, of Cincinnati, Ohio, worked opposite the Flying Fishers on the Ringling Bros. Circus from 1894 to 1904, and spent the off seasons in Petersburg, Illinois at Edward Shipp's winter quarters during that period.

The Rock Island Argus and Daily Union (Rock Island, Illinois) provided this sketch of Art Da Coma's career February 5, 1904:

> "[Arthur] Da Coma lives in Cincinnati and has a farm in Kentucky, where he has had a gymnasium built and performs some of his best feats. He commenced circus work in 1876 and has been at it ever since… His wife and two children, a girl that he has brought up, and a young Italian boy, whom he got in California, make up the family. They are recognized as the premier acrobats in the world. For nine years they have been with Ringling Bros. The great act which they gave last year was the brilliant quadruple return act and the double mid-air somersaults across the entire arena…."

This dynamic poster from 1896, pictures the Da Comas casting a flyer from one trapeze catcher to another, and may have been designed by an artist who had never actually seen their flying return act in action.

THE ADAM FOREPAUGH AND SELLS BROTHERS
-AMERICA'S GREATEST SHOWS CONSOLIDATED-
THE DARING & CAPTIVATING BICKETTS IN MOST THRILLING & WONDERFUL FEATS OF SOMERSAULTING, DIVING, LEAPING & SWINGING THROUGH SPACE. THREE HANDSOME YOUNG LADIES & ONE SPLENDID MALE ATHLETE IN THE MOST REMARKABLE PERFORMANCE IN MID-AIR EVER SEEN

Library of Congress

The Bicketts

The Bicketts were one of the first acts that were described specifically as a "flying return." In 1891 the Bicketts act was advertised featuring Minnie Bickett "the only lady in the world who has accomplished the remarkable act," that is, a one-and-a-half somersault to a hand catch, and a headlong dive from the ceiling of a theater into the net.

William E. Bickett, a native of Cincinnati, Ohio, had been inspired to perform circus work at a young age from printing show posters in a lithographic shop in that city. He joined a theatrical troupe in about 1882, and he later met his wife, Minnie Barber, when she was also performing on the road. Minnie was from Grand Rapids, Michigan, and it was there that the Bicketts established their home base. By 1898, when this Forepaugh-Sells Circus poster was printed, the Bicketts were performing with their identical twin daughters, Gracie and Alisha. By 1902 it was reported that William and Minnie were working with a daughter named "Goldie", and two nieces: Ella and Marie.

The Bicketts were the subject of controversy later in 1902 when it was reported that Goldie was not their daughter. Her real name was Goldie Bauer, of Columbus, Ohio, and she had been under contract with the Bicketts to perform with their trapeze act for the previous four years, from the age of ten. Goldie's mother took possession of the child in Wheeling, West Virginia claiming child abuse.

Pictured here are the Bicketts doing casting from stationary cradles, and also a flying return trapeze act.

THE ADAM FOREPAUGH AND SELLS BROTHERS
~AMERICA'S GREATEST SHOWS CONSOLIDATED~
THE RYAN, WEITZEL & ZORELLA'S
3 FLYING MEN OF THE AIR IN LONG LEAPS, HIGH DIVES, SINGLE, DOUBLE & TWISTING SOMERSAULTS THROUGH SPACE. THE MARVELOUS TRIO OF GYMNASTS

Library of Congress

Ryan, Weitzell & Zorella

The act of Ryan, Weitzell and Zorella, otherwise known in Europe and the United States as "the great shooting stars" or "The Flying Meteors," was described for the *St Nicholas* magazine issue of July 1901 ("Careers of Danger and Daring, Seventh Article: the Aerial Athlete," Moffeitt, Cleveland):

> "Zorella's real name, I may say, is Nagel, and so far from being a dashing foreigner, he is a quiet-spoken young man from Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he learned his first somersaults tumbling about on sawdust piles. And at sixteen he was the only boy in the region who could do the giant swing. Whereupon along came a circus with an acrobat who needed a 'brother,' and Nagel got the job. Two days later he began performing in the ring, and since then – that was ten years ago – he hasn't missed a circus day.
>
> "The act that has given these three their fame includes a swing, a leap, and a catch, which seems simple enough until one learns the length and drop of the swing, and how the leapers turn in the air, and what momentum their bodies have as they shoot toward the man hanging for the catch from the last bar. It is Weitzell who catches the other two. He was 'understander' in a 'brother' act before he learned the trapeze…Weitzel needs all his strength when Danny springs from the pedestal over there at the tent-top fifty-two feet away, and, swinging through a half-circle thirty-six feet across, comes the last sixteen feet flying free, and turning twice as he comes."

In 1898, the year this poster was printed, their big trick was described in the *Durham Sun* (Durham, North Carolina, November 22):

> "Danny Ryan's aerial feats, such as the blind-fold act, stands in the front rank of such performances. He perches himself upon a stand fifty feet high, ties a handkerchief over his eyes, puts a heavy sack over his head, then swings far out on a trapeze, lets loose, turns a double somersault in mid-air, and catches the hands of Zorella, who is hanging by the feet in another trapeze…"

RINGLING BROS' WORLD'S GREATEST SHOWS.
THE FIVE FLYING FISHERS
IN AN ENTIRELY NEW HIGH-AIR DISPLAY. AN ORIGINAL, DISTINCTIVE, AWE-INSPIRING SENSATION.
THE SIX DARING POTTERS
WHO ARE UNIQUE & UNAPPROACHABLE IN THEIR THRILLING MID-AIR EXPLOITS.

Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

The Fishers and Potters

The Flying Fishers were an early flying return act from Bloomington, Illinois; and the Potters' aerial act was a casting act originally from Quincy, Illinois. This poster dates from 1903, when the two troupes were touring with Ringling Bros. Circus. Both troupes wintered at the Edward Shipp training barn in Petersburg, Illinois in the late 1890s and early 1900s, and they were certainly familiar with one another. Edward Shipp was the equestrian director of the Ringling show, and he recruited many of the star acts to train and perform in his winter circus. The members of the Fisher troupe pictured here were Charles Noble, Henry Franz, and possibly Arthur Nelson. One of the women was Minnie Noble (wife of Charles) and the other woman has not been identified. The Fishers performed with the Ringling circus until Charles Noble died in 1906, and the act split into three parts; two taking the name of "The Flying Fishers" and the other "The Flying LaMars."

The *Atlanta Constitution* had this to say about Harry Potter, the head of the Potters' casting act on June 27, 1903:

"Potter is one of the few performers in America who has been paid a thousand dollars a week for his act. He is married and his wife works with him. They are with the Ringling show this season, and the seemingly reckless way in [which] they fling the little Potters back and forth through the air makes every mother's heart in the audience stand still. But the little Potters like it. They have been brought up on it. Baby Potter stays at the car with her nurse while the performance is going on, but she is not a stranger to the dizzy region in the top of the tent. Nearly every morning during practice hour she goes up tucked safely under the arm of her father or mother, and one of these days her baby lips will part in their first smile of response to the applause that always greets those who perform the daring and the wonderful." ("Marvels of the Modern Circus," p. 9.)

FOREPAUGH & SELLS BROTHERS
ENORMOUS SHOWS UNITED
J.A.BAILEY, W.W.COLE, LEWIS SELLS & PETER SELLS: EQUAL OWNERS.
THE 6 FLYING JORDANS
IN THEIR WONDROUS FLIGHTS

The Ringling, Tibbals Circus Collection

The Jordans

The Jordans, Lewis and Mamie, were advertising their act in 1890 as "THE ONLY ARTISTS IN THIS COUNTRY THAT DO THE RETURN FLYING TRAPEZE." Mamie was doing the flying with the act and was said to be doing all the tricks done by male leapers.

Mamie Jordan was the first woman to accomplish a double somersault with a flying return act. She first caught the trick with Ed Shipp's winter circus at the ring barn in Petersburg, Illinois in January of 1890. In 1892 the Jordans traveled to Europe where they created a sensation.

While in Europe, Lewis and Mamie advertised for young persons of athletic ability to be "adopted" into the troupe. They selected three young children "out of about a thousand" applicants. They then began traveling with a troupe of five persons, now including two young boys and a little girl. Oscar Linscoff would take the name of Jordan and perform with flying return acts until 1948. George Novikoff later pursued a career as a wire walker and catcher with flying return acts. He married Pauline Loretta, of the famous Loretta Twins' bar act, in the early 1900s and worked as catcher with the Ernestonian-Novikoff flying return act. He was known as "The Great Novikoff" wire walking artist. The third child who was Russian (born in the city of Riga in present-day Latvia), was called "Lena." By 1896 the Jordans had returned to the U.S. They traveled with the Ringling Bros. Circus for two years.

An ad in *The New York Clipper* of August 8 of that year stated that the Jordans were performing "TRIPLE SOMERSAULT FROM FLYING TRAPEZE BAR AND CATCH, HAND TO HAND." The claim was repeated in their advertisement of September 12, but not in the ad which ran on September 26. The Jordans' triple may not have been performed consistently enough to be guaranteed in a written contract at that time. It is not certain whether this feat was done with a flying return act, but it was certainly done with a casting act, casting the flyer between catchers Lewis and Mamie, hanging from trapezes at either ends of the rigging. Although they were able to complete the triple somersault, this method of casting must have proven impractical to produce a smooth flowing presentation. When they traveled to Australia in 1897, the Jordans began performing the flying return act once again.

There has been some controversy among professional performers as to whether or not Lena actually performed a triple somersault to a hand catch with Lewis. It is worthwhile to present one of the many direct quotes which described her feat, this one from *Truth* newspaper, Sydney, Australia, May 2, 1897. In this article Lena is mistakenly referred to as "Rosa" Jordan:

> "The act is accomplished by the 15-year-old girl, Rosa, who leaves the central trapeze swinging into space; then releasing herself from the bar, she completes three complete somersaults – that is, she makes three complete revolutions before alighting in her father's arms, he being suspended from a trapeze hanging directly from the proscenium arch."

Imperial Viennese Troupe

The trapeze act called "The Imperial Viennese Troupe" appeared with Barnum & Bailey Circus from 1903 until 1917. Since no detailed information has been found on the background or home base of these performers, it is possible that they were made up of an array of aerialists who were assembled by the show. Though they were described as "European" talent, they might have come from anywhere. They were undoubtedly talented performers even though they may not have belonged to one of the better-known acts such as the Potters, Fishers, or the LaMars. Newspaper photographs identified as the Imperial Viennese Troupe actually pictured the Siegrist Silbon act, and it is certain that the Siegrist Silbons were part of the Imperial Viennese Troupe in 1916 and 1917. At any rate, the Imperial Viennese Troupe was notable for its size alone, made up of from ten to twelve men and women.

THE BARNUM & BAILEY
GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH
THE IMPERIAL VIENNESE TROUPE 15 IN NUMBER
IN AN ENTIRELY NEW AND TREMENDOUS AERIAL ACT
FLYING FROM END TO END OF THE VAST ARENA AND BACK AGAIN

Boston Public Library

This 1907 poster was designed to draw the public's attention; picturing more than two dozen aerialists in motion doing a variety of acts.

THE BARNUM & BAILEY GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH
THE GREATEST HIGH AIR EXHIBITION EVER PRESENTED IN THE WORLD
THE 10 SEIGRIST SILBONS THE 5 LA MAR TROUPE AND THE 5 MARVELOUS FLYING NEAPOLITANS - A SUPERB NUMBER

Huntington Library

Siegrist-Silbons and the La Mars

In 1909 the Barnum & Bailey Circus featured two outstanding flying return acts: the Siegrist Silbons and the LaMar Troupe. This poster offers generic descriptions of a number of aerial performances, and was not meant to specifically describe any of the flying acts with the show at the time.

One of the earliest trapeze acts, as early as 1855, was the Siegrist Brothers, Francois and Auguste. Francios Siegrist' apprentice, Toto Siegrist, performed for many years as one of the foremost flyers in the business. In 1892 Toto joined in partnership with Eddie Silbon, of the Silbon family of flyers, to form the Siegrist Silbon act. The Siegrist Silbons were one of the longest-running features of the Barnum & Bailey and the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey shows.

Edward LaMar (Foreman) began his circus career in 1884, and worked with a number of different partners for several years. He was with Charles Noble's Flying Fishers troupe on the Ringling circus from 1901 until 1905; and then on the Barnum & Bailey Circus from 1908 until 1912. The name of the act changed to the LaMar Fisher Troupe, and then as the Troupe LaMar when Charles Noble died in 1906. In 1908 or 1909 Ed's nephew, Harry Foreman joined the act, and when Ed retired from performing in the 1920s, Harry took over the act, calling it the Flying LaMars.

RINGLING BROS
WORLD'S GREATEST SHOWS
ASTOUNDING FEAT OF ERNEST CLARK
TRIPLE TWISTING SOMERSAULT IN MID-AIR
NEVER BEFORE ACCOMPLISHED BY MAN

The Ringling, Tibbals Circus Collection

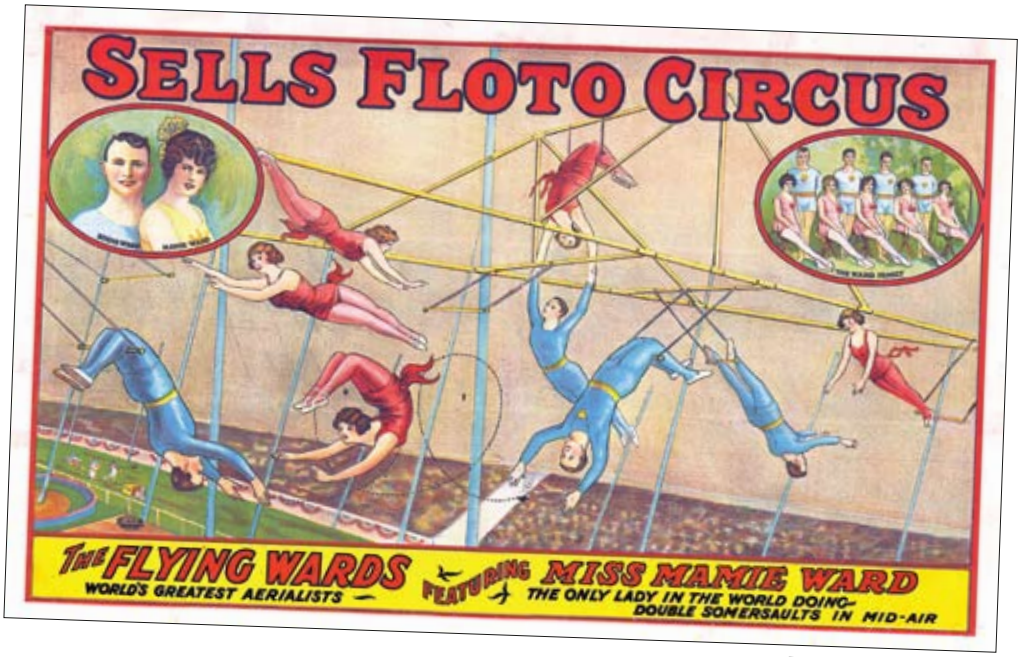
Ernie Clark

Ernie Clarke was born at Benson, England, the sixth generation of circus performers. As a child his father coached Ernie and his brother, Charles on the flying return act, practicing every day from six o'clock in the morning to dark. At age seven, it was said, Ernie first appeared at the Dalston Theatre in London doing an aerial act.

The Clarkes first performed the flying return act at the Coliseum in London, where their biggest trick was a double and catch. After that they traveled throughout England with Lord Sanger's Circus. The Clarkonians worked in Paris from 1901 to 1902. It was there that they were contracted to perform with Barnum & Bailey, first appearing with that show in 1903 at its opening at Madison Square Garden. At that time Ernie began performing his double with a pirouette, and when they played with the Ringling Bros. Circus in 1906, the Clarkes were probably performing a trick called a *phlifus; (or flifus)*. In this trick the flyer performed a twisting back somersault with a half twist to a forward somersault, a complex and difficult stunt which Ernie claimed the Clarkonians had invented. Charles had this to say about the trick in 1911:

> "For three years and a half we worked on that every day without being able to accomplish it. Time and again we were on the verge of giving it up as an impossibility. Finally we did it. Then for another year we worked together perfecting it and it was almost four years and a half to a day when it was first presented before the public. He [Ernest] is the only man in the world today who can accomplish it."

It certainly bears mentioning that Ernie was the first man to complete a triple somersault to a hand catch in a flying return act as well. This poster from 1910 attempts to describe the flifus trick by illustrating Clarke in a seemingly impossible feat of contortionism.


SELLS FLOTO CIRCUS
THE FLYING WARDS
WORLD'S GREATEST AERIALISTS
FEATURING MISS MAMIE WARD
THE ONLY LADY IN THE WORLD DOING
DOUBLE SOMERSAULTS IN MID-AIR

Tegge Circus Archives

The Wards

The Flying Wards troupe of Bloomington, Illinois started out as a sensational brother and sister double trapeze act, made up of Eddie and Jennie Ward. They were performing as early as 1904, and within three years they were working as a center-ring attraction for the great Ringling Bros. Circus. In 1912 Eddie married Mayme Fay Harvey, of the Hines-Kimball acrobatic troupe; and Jennie married Alec Todd, of the Flying Herberts. Todd taught them to perform a flying return act, and this foursome made up the core of the original Flying Wards. They performed for several years with Hagenbeck Wallace Circus, and in 1915 Eddie built a barn in Bloomington, Illinois for trapeze training. Tragedy struck when the troupe was involved in the Hagenbeck-Wallace train wreck disaster of 1918, and Jennie Ward and another girl in the act were killed. Alec Todd left the act at that time and pursued other professions.

Through the 1920s, Eddie and Mayme Ward continued to expand the act, training dozens of first-class aerialists. They provided all of the aerial acts for the Sells Floto, Hagenbeck-Wallace, and John Robinson circuses under the management of the American Circus Corporation of Peru, Indiana. Eddie Ward died in 1929, and Mayme continued for several years to manage the troupe and train aerialists in the barn. In 1935 the training barn was sold to their former student, Arthur Concello. Under Concello's management, the barn continued to be used for practice into the 1950s.

Fisher's Fearless Flyers

Bob Musselman broke in as a flyer with his brother-in-law, Charles Waller's act, the Flying Fishers, in the early 1910s. He worked with various acts including the great Flying Wards troupes in the 1920s, and formed his own act which he called "Bob Fisher's Five Fearless Flyers," after Eddie Ward's death in 1929. This act was likely the most traveled act of its time, having toured extensively through Europe, Hawaii and the Latin American countries in the 1930s and 1940s.

This poster is likely from the Fearless Flyers' European tour of 1931 which included Spain, Portugal, France, Belgium and Germany. The personnel of the act consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Bob Fisher (Musselman), Harold "Tuffy" Genders, Gracie Moore, and catcher Everett White. In the winter months of 1931-1932 the troupe took a 28-day transit from Hamburg to Buenos Aires, where they began an extensive tour of South America. On their return to the United States when playing Ligonier Park, Harold Genders and Gracie Moore were married on the pedestal board of the rigging before a crowd of thousands of spectators.

Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library

BOB FISHER'S
5
FEARLESS FLYERS
DOUBLE SOMERSAULT BLINDFOLDED WITH UPPER PORTION OF BODY COMPLETLY COVERED WITH SACK.
DOUBLE SAUT DE LA MORT. DU TRAPÈZE AUX MAINS. LES YEUX BAINDÉS ET COUVERT D'UN SAC.
DOPPEL SALTOMORTAL MIT VERBUNDENEN AUGEN VON TRAPEZ NACH HÄNDE.
DOBLE SALTO MORTAL DESDE EL TRAPECIO CON LOS OJOS VENDADOS Y CUBIERTO CON UN SACO

Tegge Circus Archives

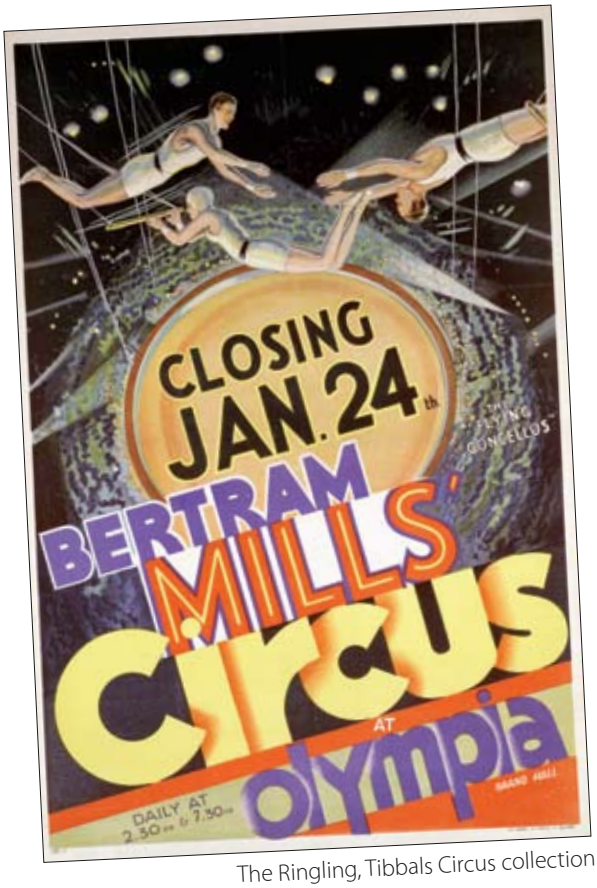
The Codonas

Alfredo Codona is still considered to be one of the finest flying return artists in history, not only for being one of the first to perform a triple somersault, but also because his elegant form was superb.

Alfredo was born in 1893 in Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico. His first experience in aerial arts was with single trapeze performance, but in 1913 his father formed a flying return act and began working as the catcher for Alfredo and his brother, Lalo. They worked with the Wirth Circus in Australia for three seasons, and in 1916 the Codonas teamed with the Siegrist Silbon act and performed with Barnum & Bailey in its big 14-person act called the Imperial Viennese Troupe. As a flyer, Codona was sometimes described as reckless; taking chances, practicing without a mechanic belt. In this manner he learned to perform the triple somersault. When Alfredo's father retired from the act, his brother, Lalo, took over as catcher.

Codona's private life was one of the great modern circus tragedies. In 1931 his wife, the celebrated solo aerialist, Lillian Leitzel, fell from the Spanish rings and died in Copenhagen, Denmark. In his grief, Alfredo became more reckless than ever. He remarried an Australian flyer named Vera Bruce who had been working in the act. Alfredo took a bad fall into the net in 1933, and was never able to recover enough to return to trapeze work. In the final stages of the process of divorce from Vera in 1937, Alfredo ended his own and Vera's life in the lawyer's office, a tragic victim of physical debilitation played out in rage, aggression and depression.

This lithograph was printed in Budapest, Hungary c.1925 and used to promote Codona appearances in Europe when the act consisted of Alfredo, his first wife, Clara, and brother Lalo.



The Ringling, Tibbals Circus collection

The Concellos

The Flying Concellos were certainly the most illustrious and successful of the students to come out of the Flying Wards troupe, of Bloomington, Illinois. Arthur Vasconcellos (later shortened to "Concello") broke in with the Ward troupe in 1926, and his future wife, Antoinette joined the following year. When Eddie Ward died in 1929, Art and Antoinette married and formed their own troupe.

Maureen Brunsdale, the world's leading authority on the Concellos, noted:

> "This 1934 poster lauds the Flying Concellos' triumphant return to England to perform in the Bertram Mills Circus. Two years previous the act had been booked for this holiday show but because Art Concello could not consistently catch the triple somersault, their contract (which stipulated a successful triple in every performance) was nullified on the evening of dress rehearsal. With two years of tripling under his belt, the act returned to England where they enjoyed both rave reviews and a full run of dates, December 20, 1934-January 24, 1935."

Art Concello began managing other flying acts in the 1930s, and later retired from flying to became general manager of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Chris Berry Collection

RINGLING BROS AND BARNUM & BAILEY COMBINED CIRCUS
The Great OTARI TROUPE in STARTLING MID-AIR FLIGHTS from a HUGE AERIAL CROSS

The Otari Act

The Otari Troupe came to the United States and joined Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus in 1934. They were placed over the center ring between the Concello and the Harold Voise flying acts. But the Otaris were not a flying return act. They performed a "double flying bar act," or "passing act" on a large illuminated rigging in the shape of an "iron cross;" at times with two flyers abreast passing others pairs leaping in opposite directions, and sometimes flying perpendicular across, to-and-fro. Beginning with ten flyers in 1934, they continued in the U. S. until 1940 with seven or eight people.

Though it could be said that the Otaris did not do the biggest tricks – their bar-to-bar act rigging did not allow for it – the act was a complex and sensational one. The *Daily Republican* of Monongahela, Pennsylvania stated July 29, 1938 that their tricks consisted of "twisting in mid-air, sometimes actually somersaulting." As the *Brooklyn Times Union* reported on May 9, 1934, "With so many flying bodies in the air at once a collision seems unavoidable… yet all contacts are made with a precision that speaks well for the training of the troupe." One unusual feature of the act was that the flyers all wore "street clothes." "They convey the impression of being business people," said the *Brooklyn Times Union* May 11. "The highlight of the act comes, however, when all ten, swinging from different parts of the frame, regulate their flight so as just barely to avoid colliding."

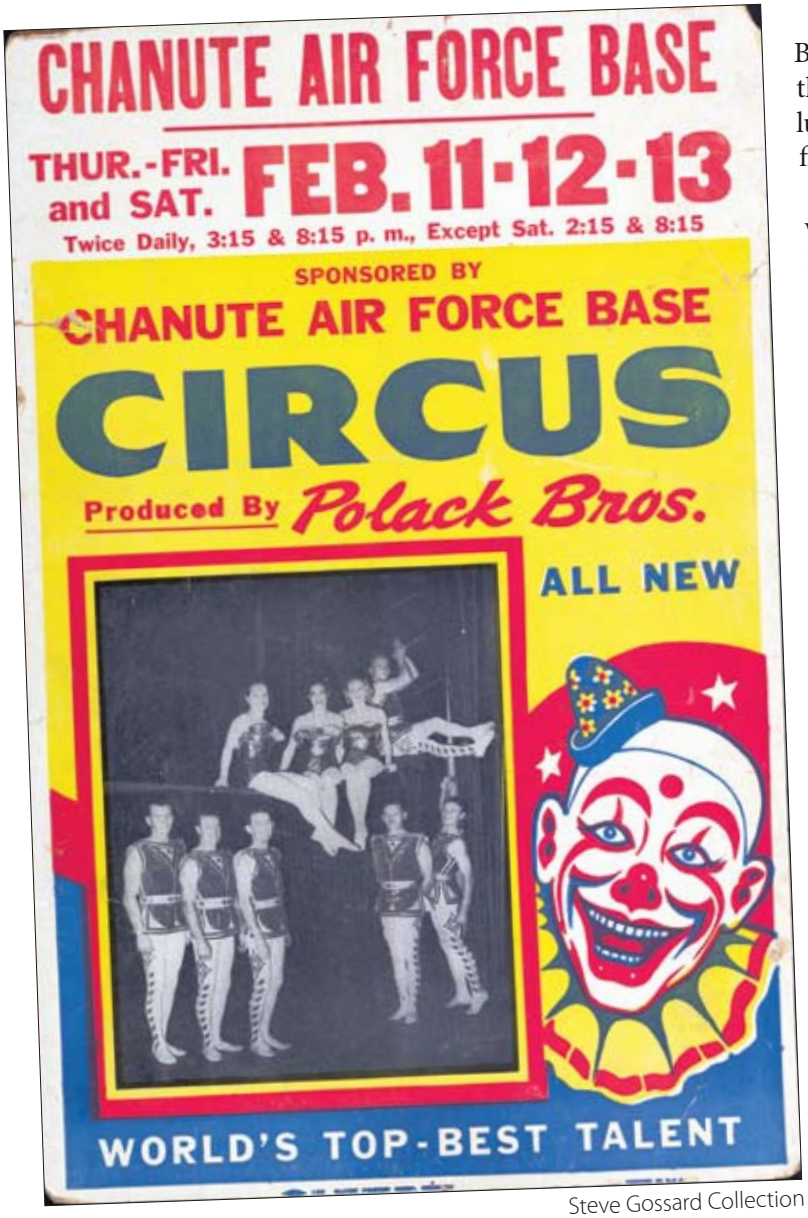
Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

TOM MIX CIRCUS
TOM MIX "himself" and TONY
WILL POSITIVELY APPEAR AT EACH PERFORMANCE
BEYOND ALL QUESTION OR DOUBT THE MOST AMAZING EXHIBITION OF SKILL, NERVE, STRENGTH AND GRACE THAT MANKIND HAS EVER GAZED UPON
THE ARBAUGH FAMILY — ARISTOCRATS OF THE AIR

The Arbaughs

The Flying Arbaughs were another product of the Bloomington, Illinois trapeze community. James Arbaugh had broken in with Harry LaVan's Flying LaVans in the 1910s, and in 1920 Arbaugh moved over to the Flying Wards troupe, where he met and married Jessie Hubble. Jessie had formerly been with the three Royce Sisters of the Le Roy acrobatic troupe from Peoria, Illinois. Under the direction of the Mayme Ward, sisters Erma and Mable Hubble, would become outstanding solo aerialists, and Jessie would become a first-class catcher with the flying return act. All three sisters took the professional name of "Ward." Erma then won acclaim for breaking Lillian Leitzel's record of one-arm swings. After Eddie Ward died in 1929, the Arbaughs split off from the Ward troupe and formed a troupe of their own.

Cowboy movie star, Tom Mix, had left his career in the movies in 1929 and began performing with the Sells Floto Circus. There he met Mable Hubble, and they were married in 1932. Mix joined in partnership with circus owner, Sam B. Dill, in 1934 to form the Dill Mix show, and after Dill died in 1935 the show continued under the name Tom Mix Circus. The Arbaughs became the principal flying act with the Dill Mix show when Tom married Mable, and Erma Ward (Hubble) became the show's star solo aerialist.


CHANUTE AIR FORCE BASE
THUR.-FRI. and SAT. FEB. 11-12-13
Twice Daily, 3:15 & 8:15 p. m., Except Sat. 2:15 & 8:15
SPONSORED BY
CHANUTE AIR FORCE BASE
CIRCUS
Produced By Polack Bros.
ALL NEW
WORLD'S TOP-BEST TALENT

Steve Gossard Collection

Ward Bell Troupe

In 1932 the Arbaughs broke in Gus and Betty Bell, of the Bell family acrobats (from Gainesville, Texas) with their flying return act. In 1934 Eddie and Mayme Ward's son, Harold, teamed up with Gus Bell to form the Ward Bell flying return act on the Dill Mix show. In 1935 and 1936, the Ward Bells worked with the Arbaughs on the Tom Mix Circus. They toured South America in 1938 with Atayde Bros. Circus.

From 1940-41, the Ward Bells presented a six-person teeterboard act and four-person flying act with the Hamid Morton show. Harold and Gus both spent three years in the service from 1942-45, and came out in 1946 working parks and fairs. Harold's brother, Eddie Ward Jr. had worked as a catcher with different flying acts through the 1930s. He caught for the Flying Concellos in 1937 when Antoinette caught her first triple somersault. He worked a number of important mechanical and transportation jobs with various circuses over time, and from 1948-53 he joined the Ward Bell troupe working as a catcher. Harold and Gus operated the Ward Bell Circus in 1955, finishing their tour in Honolulu where their partnership broke up. Harold formed a new flying act which he managed from 1958 to 1961.

This window card of the Ward Bell troupe was used with one of the Shrine circus units produced by Polack Bros. that they performed with in the 1950s.

Trapeze – A Movie Inspiration

Before becoming an actor, Burt Lancaster had worked in circus and vaudeville in a stationary bar act called "Lang and Cravat" with his partner, Nick Cravat. Lancaster never lost his respect for the supreme athletic discipline required for the aerial arts. After achieving his peerless reputation as a movie actor, Lancaster developed a system whereby he alternately produced films with wide popular appeal,

Steve Gossard Collection

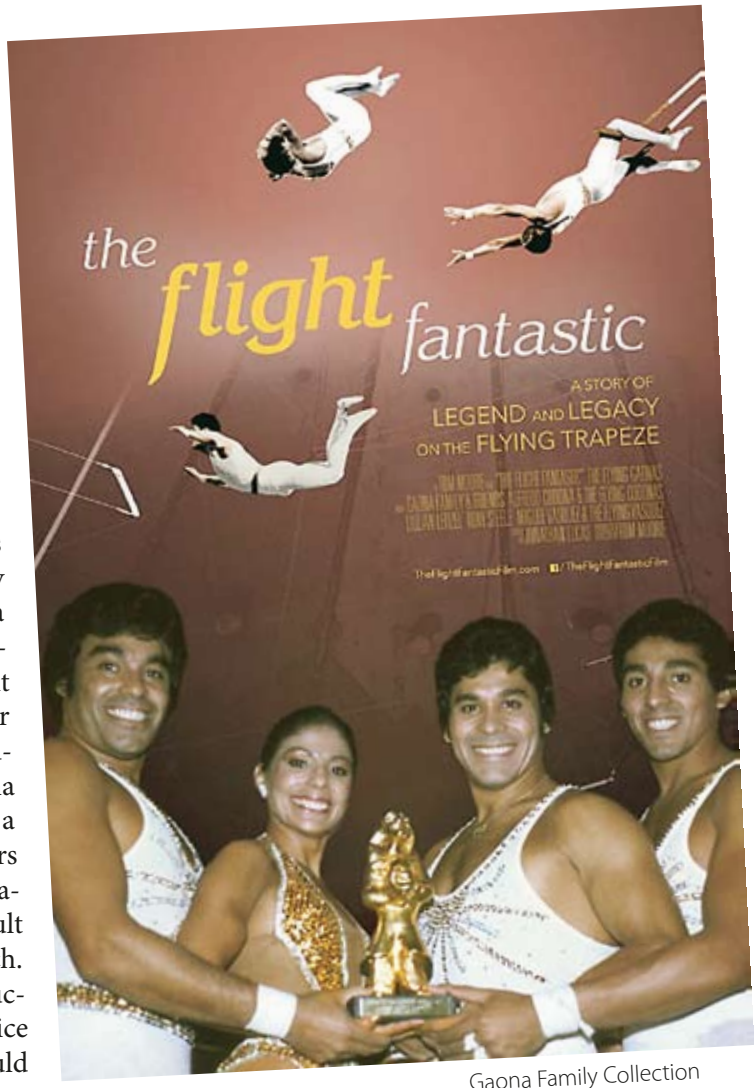
as well as films which were very high in artistic and intellectual quality.

In 1955 Hecht-Lancaster Productions was casting a dramatic film in which the main characters were performing a flying-return act. The plot was based on a novel titled *The Killing Frost* by Max Catto, but the entire story was rewritten for the screenplay. The main conflict of the story centered on the quest for the completion of the elusive triple somersault, and the tension was focused on this supreme exercise in courage and physical excellence. There was added conflict with a romantic triangle between the catcher, played by Burt Lancaster; the flyer, played by Tony Curtis; and the seductive female flyer in the act, played by Gina Lollobrigida. The film was appropriately called *Trapeze*.

Lancaster needed someone to serve as the stunt double for Curtis in the movie. A small number of flyers had completed the triple over the years, but by 1955 there were few who were competent enough to attempt it. Fay Alexander had already performed stunts for the movie, *The Greatest Show On Earth.* He not only fit the physical description, but his form was also exquisite. Alexander was contracted to do the stunts as the principal flyer in the movie, Tino Orsini. Eddie Ward Jr. contracted to double for Lancaster as Mike Ribbel, the catcher. Willie Krause and Sally Marlowe were also recruited to perform stunts for Gina Lollobrigida in the show.

The finished product, shot at the historic Cirque d'Hiver quarters in Paris, was arguably the finest circus film ever produced, and it inspired a generation of young athletes to take up trapeze. Tony Steele, the first man to complete a three-and-a-half somersault to a catch, memorized nearly the entire dialogue of the screenplay. Tito Gaona, one of the all-time greatest trapeze artists in history, saw the movie over and over as a young trampoline artist, identifying completely with the character of Tino, and committed his entire career to the art of trapeze.

The Gaonas



Gaona Family Collection

In 1968 Tito Gaona practiced and caught a new trick he called a "double double", a double twisting double somersault. This trick was actually a variation of a quadruple somersault since it consisted of four complete revolutions. The Gaona troupe tried for a number of years to complete a quadruple somersault to a hand catch. They were successful in practice in 1976, but could never complete it consistently enough to put it into the act. Yet this achievement had proven that the trick was possible, and the biggest trick within the profession then became the quadruple somersault.

Tito Gaona is one of the greatest showmen and trapeze flyers of all time. His career of countless triple somersaults from the flybar to the catcher may never be duplicated. The achievements of the entire Gaona family span more than 130 years. Tito's brother, Richie Gaona, has had a fantastic career as well performing stunts for movies and television.

Film producer, Tom Moore, had this to say about *The Flight Fantastic* documentary:

> "While learning to 'fly' from Richie Gaona of the legendary Flying Gaonas, I was introduced not only to the amazing aerial feats of the Gaona family, but to many other aerial legends as well. All history is ephemeral, but in the circus, it is ridiculously fragile, existing only in fragments, mostly without context. It seemed important and urgent to try and provide both context and linear history to the trapeze lore, and perhaps most importantly to show the passion the athletic art of the trapeze engenders in professionals and amateurs alike by putting some of that excitement on film."

Please reference two wonderfully comprehensive sources for the story of the Gaona family: *The First Family of the Air, The Flying Gaonas,* by Chris Berry (*Bandwagon,* Vol. 65, No. 3, 2021); and *Born To Fly, the Story of Tito Gaona,* by Tito Gaona and Harry Graham, Wild Rose publishers, 1984.

Chris Berry Collection

Vazquez Family

The poster shown here depicted the feat that was and is one of the truly great circus and athletic achievements in world history. It commemorated the first quadruple somersault from the flybar to the hands of the catcher, with a standard sized rigging, before an audience in a public performance. It had taken place on the evening of July 10, 1982, by Miguel and Juan Vazquez. The event was so carefully recorded by so many people that it should never be disputed by anyone. Juan Vazquez video recorded more than 2,500 quadruple somersaults over the years until they stopped performing the trick in the mid-1990s. And they did this with a completion rate of over 80%; enough to be considered "consistent" by any standard.

Though many of the Vazquez brothers' most complex and difficult tricks had been pioneered by Tito Gaona before them, the quadruple somersault was the ambition and crowning achievement of all trapeze performers, and universally established for the Vazquez brothers with the title of the "Greatest" team of flying return trapeze artists in history. Their amazing struggle and achievement were chronicled in detail by author Harry Graham in his epic book, *The Biggest Trick* (co-authored with Miguel Vazquez in 1994) and in Phil Weyland's tremendous documentary, *The Last Great Circus Flyer* in 2015.

The Cavarettas

This Circus Circus Casino poster in part depicts the fabulous Cavaretta flying act. This act, featuring all girl flyers, was the main feature of the Circus Circus show for more than 30 years, and it was certainly one of the most elegant and beautiful flying return acts ever produced.

Kandy Cavaretta was recruited from the St. Petersburg, Florida Community Circus in 1961 by the legendary flyer and stunt man, Fay Alexander. Her sister, Terry joined the act at age eight (or nine) the following year, and was one of the youngest flyers ever to work in a flying return act. The Cavaretta family later purchased a rigging, and brother, Jim, learned to hang in the catchbar. When sisters Maureen and Marleen later joined the troupe, the Cavarettas became a self-taught teenage sensation.

Over the years, Terry Cavaretta developed into one of the greatest woman flyers in history. It is not likely that any other flyer (aside from Tito Gaona) will ever duplicate the incredible number of triple somersaults that she completed in her extraordinary career.

The Cranes

Circus performances were often, by nature, variety shows, with a series of disparate events united only in the fact that they took place under the same canvas top. In the same way, flying acts were a series of separate tricks, related only in that they were done using the same rigging and with the same process. In recent decades, some circuses have attempted to integrate the entire performance into a general theme or story line. The Russian trapeze artist, Vilen Golovko, pursued this objective early on with his act, The Flying Cranes.

Steve Gossard Collection

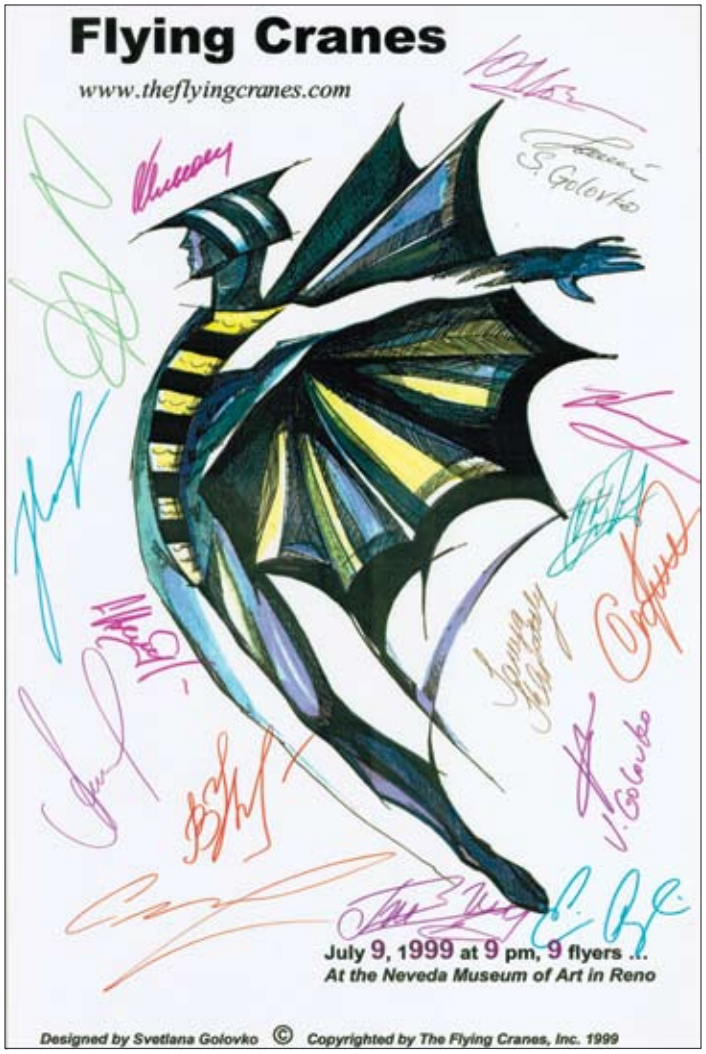
An article by Glenn Collins appeared in the *New York Times* December 30, 1990 which provided a detailed account of Golovko's career and the story of how he organized the Flying Cranes, from its inception in 1981 to their sensational debut in the United States with the Moscow Circus. The Cranes did not work from a conventional flying return act rigging. Their apparatus could fill a vast arena, sometimes using the net as a trampoline, the aerialists taking huge leaps in unexpected directions, with three catchers and six flyers.

The performance followed a Russian story-line of a soldier who died in combat ascending into the heavens as a flying crane. The complexity of the flyers' leaps and passes, including quadruple somersaults to the hands of the catchers, was a secondary consideration. The story and the discipline required for the artistic presentation was the primary consideration. Collins quoted Golovko as stating:

> "…our greatest achievement is not the quadruple, but the simultaneity of our aerial gymnastics and the psychological effectiveness of our acting – all of it working together to move an audience… we do the four because we wanted to do the most difficult trick in the world. We strive to reach perfection in our own work. We want to be the best, and do the impossible."

This extremely disciplined conception and execution earned the international respect of dance professionals as well as trapeze artists, perhaps as an art form apart from any other. At the time of Collins' interview, the Cranes were pursuing a quintuple somersault.

Steve Gossard Collection


Flying Cranes
www.theflyingcranes.com
July 9, 1999 at 9 pm, 9 flyers ..
At the Neveda Museum of Art in Reno
Designed by Svetlana Golovko © Copyrighted by The Flying Cranes, Inc. 1999

This poster was designed by Vilen Golovko's twin sister, Svetlana, and was autographed by the entire cast during an appearance in the U.S. Bw

About the author

Steve Gossard was asked by the Museums Department at Illinois State University to curate an exhibit from the circus collection at Milner Library in 1984. He soon realized that Bloomington, Illinois had been a center for trapeze performance for over 100 years. As time went on, his research expanded to include the history of trapeze and the circus history of Illinois in general. In 1991 he self-published *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance, the Evolution of Trapeze* (revised in 1994, now out of print). He has also published numerous articles in *Bandwagon, White Tops* and *Circus Report* magazines.

Dutch Treat: The Fanciful Footwork of Miss Loni

Part I

All of the photographs and other images in this article are from the Timothy Noel and Barbara Tegge Collection, Tegge Circus Archives, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

by Timothy Noel Tegge

Miss Loni, antipodist extraordinaire, 1951. The "Maurice Seymour" studio was established in Chicago in 1929 by Russian-born photographers Maurice and Seymour Zeldman. They specialized in theatrical publicity photos for approximately 40 years. Agents receiving and distributing any entertainer's pictures bearing the famous insignia knew they were dealing with exceptional artists.

She breezed into the ring with an elegant swagger, her heavily beaded and fur-trimmed gown whirling behind her as she nodded flirtatiously to no one in particular. Making her way to her *bokje* (pronounced "bok-ya") – the customized bench on which she would perch – the young Venus-like woman kicked herself backwards into a reclining position with legs upstretched, rolled a 24″ air-filled leather ball up her shins and onto her feet, and began running the orb with the vitality of a log roller and the grace of a swan. MISS LONI was holding court in the center ring, and for the next eight minutes the audience was completely transfixed. She kicked the ball into the air several times before spinning it on her toe at breakneck speed; then side-kicked it to her assistant and husband, Freddie, who quickly exchanged the ball for the next prop in her repertoire, as she sat up briefly to claim a well-deserved round of applause.

By now, practically everyone has seen her perform at some point, although they may not be directly aware of it. Anyone who has ever watched Cecil B. DeMille's Academy Award-winning epic, *The Greatest Show On Earth* (1952), or Billy Rose's star-studded musical *Jumbo* (1962) has invited her into their home at least a couple of times. Loni was an antipodist: in laymen's terms, a foot juggler. To this day she is remembered with respect by fellow jugglers and fans the world over as one of the very best, recognized not only for

Frederik Van Voorden and Miss Loni photographed in the Ringling-Barnum backyard during the 1951 under-canvas tour. The "pie car" wagon can be seen in the background.

her beauty but also her technical expertise, consistency and control.

She was born Apolonia Abeen (pronounced "ah-bayn") on April 14, 1926, in Amsterdam, Holland, the eldest of three children born to Roelf and Barbara Abeen, who were first-generation show people. Roelf came from a construction and contractor's background; no one, Loni included, was ever able to confirm exactly what enticed her father to choose show business as a profession or her mother to eventually join him on the journey. Keeping in mind the time period in which we can trace his earliest theatrical endeavors – encroaching on the first World War with its uncertain threat of being sent off into combat – the possibilities of a romantic lifestyle in the limelight had to be far more appealing to the mid-teenage or young-adult Roelf than the normal town existence. Whatever the case, Loni recalled that her father was infatuated with show business and often told her that "it was the most beautiful profession in the world."[1]

An undated handbill, c.1914-1918, beckons *"BEZOEKT HET CIRCUS ABEEN KERMIS ALHIER [VISIT THE CIRCUS ABEEN CARNIVAL HERE]* and trumpets the appearance of *"ABEEN'S TROUPE Wereld-attractie: De Dooden-Rit langs de loodrechte muur met Motor en Rijwiel!"* [ABEEN'S TROUPE World attraction: The Death-Ride along the perpendicular wall with motorbike and bicycle!] The troupe consisted of Roelf and two brothers, Coen and Henk. Roelf also performed a power act under the professional *nom de plume* of "Dillon":

> *"DILLON, Kampioen-Athleet. Het wonder der menschelijke kracht. DILLON tilt een gewicht tot 1500 pond. Levende caroussel met 2 matrozen. Alleen daarstaande met zijn onovertroffen kracht-act. DILLON geeft iedereen avond 1000 gld. belooning aan hem die in staat is zijn wekzaamheden na te maken. Levende brug met belasting van 10 personen."*[2]
>
> [DILLON, Champion Athlete. The miracle of human strength. DILLON lifts a weight of up to 1,500 pounds. Living carousel with 2 sailors. Standing alone with his unsurpassed power act. DILLON gives every evening 1,000 guilders in reward to him who is able to duplicate his work. Living bridge with the weight of 10 people.]

BEZOEKT HET

CIRCUS ABEEN

KERMIS ALHIER.

OPTREDEN VAN

THE 3 ORLOFS?? verbluffende tandkracht-act.

PAOLA ERMANO, Luchtvoltigeuse.

ABEEN'S TROUPE.

Rensport. Looping the Loop.

ABEEN'S TROUPE.

Wereld-attractie:

De Dooden-Rit langs de loodrechte muur met Motor en Rijwiel!

Kunstrijden. Motorrennen.

De verachters van den dood!
Dooden-rit aan den loodrechten muur met Motor en Rijwielen.

DILLON, Kampioen-Athleet.

Het wonder der menschelijke kracht. DILLON tilt een gewicht tot 1500 pond. Levende caroussel met 2 matrozen. Alleen daarstaande met zijn onovertroffen kracht-act.
DILLON geeft iedereen avond 1000 gld. belooning aan hem, die in staat is zijn werkzaamheden na te maken. Levende brug met belasting van 10 personen.

Mej. SEVA SAFELLI, Voltige-Rijdster.

De pauzen worden door Clowns en Augusten aangevuld.

HEROS, Kracht-jongleur.

F. J. Conté, Orignal Equilibrist-Ak.

En het overige programma.

Aanvang der Voorstellingen 's avonds 8 uur.

Zondagmiddag van 4 tot 6 uur groote Kinder- en Familie-Voorstelling.

PRIJZEN DER PLAATSEN:

1e rang f 1.25, 2e rang f 1.0., 3e rang f 0.75, 4e rang f 0.50.
Kinderen op alle rangen half geld.

Ondergeteekende maakt het geachte publiek opmerkzaam, dat men deze onderneming niet met mindewaardige zaken gelieve te vergelijken.

Aanbevelend: DE DIRECTIE.

BERGPLAATS VOOR RIJWIELEN.

Performing their motorcycle "Death-Ride," Abeen's Troupe included Loni's father Roelf and two of his brothers. This one-sided World War I era herald is the earliest known existing piece of advertising for the newly conceived Circus Abeen.

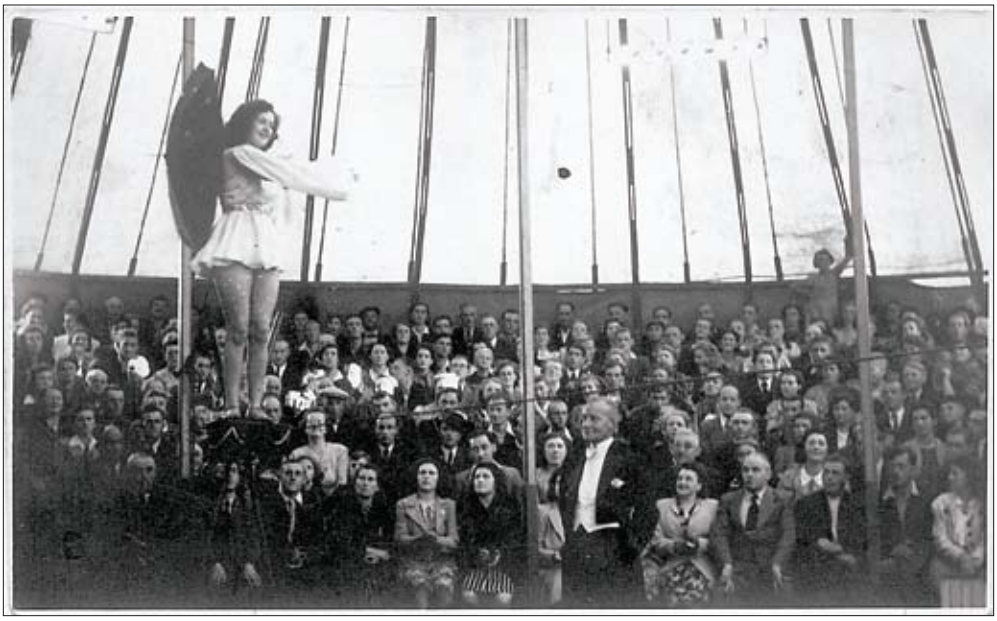
Rounded out with a few additional little-known to unknown variety performers, this particular pageant was more than likely the first incarnation of what would later become

Loni's parents Roelf and Barbara became "De Gladiatoren" shortly after their marriage, performing a novelty strongman number throughout the mid-1920s and 1930s.

cycling daredevil turned sensationalized strongman eventually convinced another brother, Jan, to accompany him in exploring further show-business adventures throughout the early-to-mid-1920s. Somewhere along the way, Roelf met and married a girl from Aachen, Germany, and in almost no time he and his bride, Barbara, soon became "De Gladiatoren." The couple hoped to make a name for themselves on the European circus and music hall platform, but at a time when there were literally hundreds of other novelty entertainers competing for like attention, the Abeens were essentially lost in the shuffle. Nonetheless, by 1930 they had steady work, playing secondary hall shows, small circuses, fairs, and eventually traveling with their own little variety outfit – all primarily within the Netherlands and occasionally somewhat beyond. Although specific details of their muscle-act routine also went undocumented, Loni recalled that at some point during the act, between manipulating an oversized gyroscope and vaulting large objects into the air and catching them with one hand, her father also spun a large chariot-like wheel with his feet, verifying some familiarity with foot juggling. He would later share this knowledge when coaching his daughter.

During the years of Loni's youth, Old-World European customs frequently tolerated callous tactics when it came to instructing young up-and-coming show kids, threatening and even hitting them while in training to hone their craft. Loni's coaching was brutality free. She would reiterate that her father always reminded her, "you should never practice out of fear; you should practice out of love and respect for your act."[3] That principle was affectionately instilled in her at an early age, as it was several years later, when her younger brother Janny, born in 1933, was also brought up in the Loni's father's traveling show. It unpretentiously matured from there. Poorly documented history, however, indicates that this first particular go around did not last long. Not originating from a show business background, Roelf's siblings soon opted for more conventional occupations, diminishing the not-so-illustrious Abeens to a troupe of one. It was Roelf's fervent interest in the variety arts that undoubtedly motivated him to continue and further develop what skills he could. Essentially self-taught, he observed everything with a determined eye, learned numerous basic exploits, and improvised from there. Incorporating choreographed moves with acrobatic and balancing stunts, the

A good "tip" on the midway of the Circus/Variété Theater Abeen, somewhere in the Netherlands, c.1933-35.

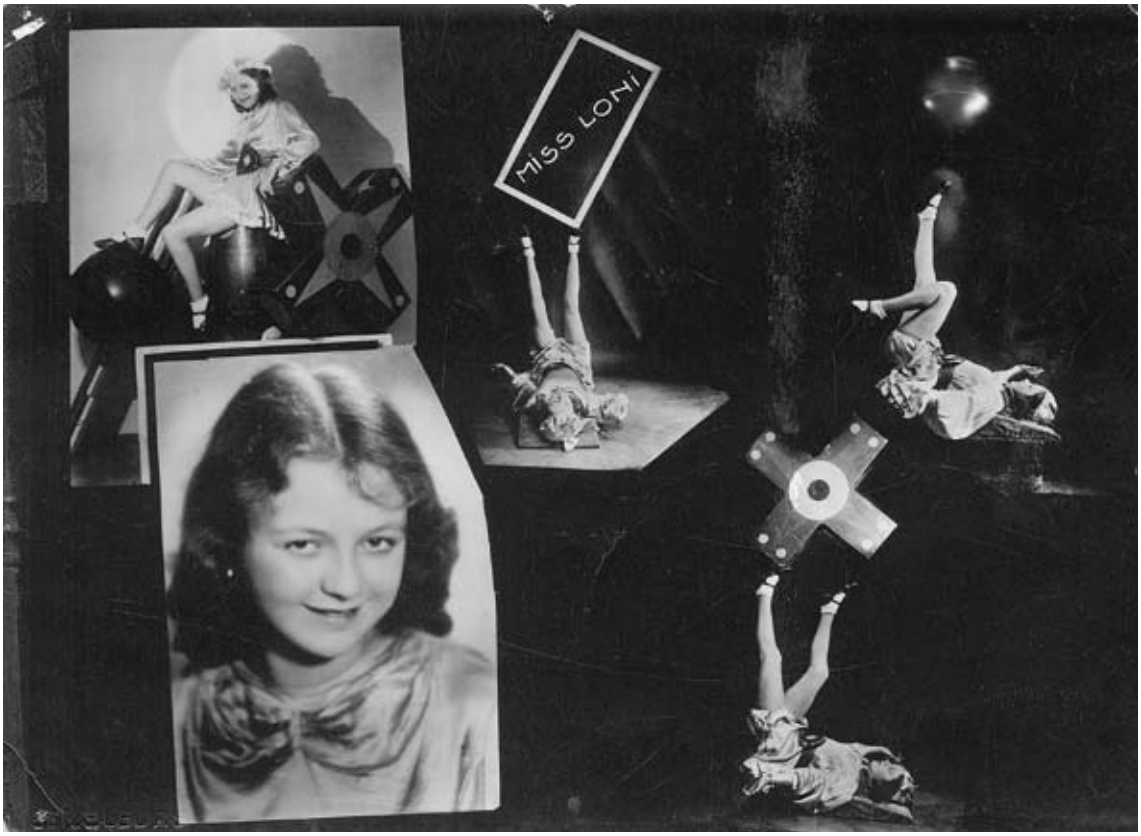


Shown here at about age ten, Loni first presented a tightwire act on her family's show, c.1936. Within a few years, her foot-juggling skills would far outshine her wire-walking abilities, and she eventually phased out the wire act altogether.

show world. Decades later, Loni's only child, Barbara, would be encouraged in the same manner.

Loni recalled that she took her first steps in the spotlight on a tight wire, at about age ten. By then, around 1936, Circus Abeen had been reinvented into a charming diminutive family show, appearing primarily at city festivals and street fairs under what was known in Dutch as a *paradetent*. The layout included a carnival-like show front with an elaborate proscenium framing out more of a "bally"-style stage. Once through the entrance and into the performance area, a semi-circular configuration of bleacher seating surrounded a stage rather than an actual ring, unlike the larger traditional European circuses, that were mostly one-ring affairs.

Circus Abeen offered an abridged program of maybe 30-plus minutes several times each day, much along the lines of a sideshow or back-end show on a carnival midway. If business was good in any given location, the show could do anywhere from four to ten performances every day. Included on the bill were a handful of family offerings, such as a balancing act and foot juggling turn by Roelf himself, Loni's wire routine, a couple of clown entrees by an old family friend, Jacobus Boven, and when the budget permitted, an act or two by either a couple or family to augment the program in various towns along the trail. As the years progressed, Loni's brother Janny would also learn to perform an unsupported ladder act and eventually present an act with performing bears. It was a family affair in every way with Roelf at the helm; his wife handling the finances, sewing costumes, cooking for the entire crew, and occasionally still working as the strongman's assistant; and the kids filling in wherever necessary. "My father wasn't all that interested in having a great big show," Loni remarked.



Miss Loni, c.1937-38. This was Loni's first "professional" composite photo. In the United States, 8 x 10 photographs were standard promotional tools of the trade, but European artists often favored smaller 4 x 6 postcard-type of pictures.

"Not everyone wanted to be big time. He was more than content with a small quality family operation."[4]

Loni's father eventually taught her the fundamentals of foot juggling, for which she demonstrated a notable talent, and by the age of twelve had begun performing it daily. In the beginning she preferred the wire act because she believed the constant eye contact with the audience helped establish a stronger rapport with them. But as soon as she lay back

The cast of Circus Abeen posed for a picture somewhere along their itinerary probably around 1942-43. Loni is on the upper right, standing in the truck that hauled a good portion of the equipment and also served as an on-location dressing quarters for the performers. Loni's younger brother Janny is standing directly below her, slightly to the right.

on her bench, Loni commanded significant attention with her foot juggling drills; there were fewer foot jugglers in existence to begin with, and, at that time, most of them were men. Her father additionally pointed out that it was the type of act that she could do entirely on her own – she would not have to rely on another person to complete a trick or honor a contract, and there would be no stakes to pound or riggings to guy out. Overall, it presented an ideal path to follow, and follow it she did.

Despite the challenges of World War II, Roelf and Barbara's show thrived throughout the 1940s, albeit modestly. Loni cherished the surroundings to perfect her skills, becoming a top-notch performer and, in no time, a much-in-

Loni Abeen with clown and long-time family friend Jacobus Boven, c.1943. Although not related to the family, Loni always referred to Boven as "Oom [uncle] Jacobus."

demand attraction. Shortly after the war ended, and with her parents' blessings, she left the Variété Theater Abeen behind and set out on her own, presenting her foot-juggling act on the road for a while with Holland's Circus Briantelli. Soon Loni landed a spot with a USO show in Germany.[5] The manager of the show was Frederik Van Voorden, half of a Dutch eccentric dance duo that was on the verge of disbanding. Freddie and Loni became well acquainted with each other and soon paired up. When the USO tour came to an end and Loni moved on to her next engagement with Cirque Medrano in France, Freddie went along as her assistant, personal manager, prop superintendent, and love interest.

With his dancer's dexterity, Freddie complemented Loni's sequence of actions well, especially dressed in black on a darkened stage with Loni in a spotlight. She would toss, kick, and spin her ball; twirl a gigantic wooden cylinder mocked-up to resemble a cigarette; flip a four-foot-tall wooden playing card end-over-end; and then run an unwieldly four-pointed cross over the flats of her feet like a pinwheel spinning in the wind. And at the conclusion of each trick, Freddie would grab the prop and replace it with the next in mere seconds. The audience never saw him come or go. The props just seemed to appear and disappear on Loni's feet. As accomplished as Miss Loni was, Freddie put the final tweak on her sheer perfection.

It was more than likely her appearance at Amsterdam's famous Royal Theatre Carré with Circus Strassburger that caught the attention of directors from some of Europe's most prestigious theaters and grand halls. While vaudeville in America was beginning to show signs of weakening in popularity, European stage reviews remained strong in virtually every country. Variety acts of all types were in demand,

A publicity image of Loni posed on the stage and displayed in the foyer of Stockholm's famous China Theater, 1949. It was there that international talent scout Umberto Schichtholz-Bedini approached Loni to come to America the following year to perform with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.

particularly those featuring attractive young women. Loni became an instant sensation, gracing the stages of Belgium, Italy, France, and Sweden.

In 1949, as she was performing at the China Theater in Stockholm, Umberto Schichtholz-Bedini, an international talent scout working with both John Ringling North and film producer Cecil B. DeMille, singled out Loni and approached her about coming to the United States.[6] DeMille[7] was beginning to sketch out his next screenplay, which would be set on a gigantic American circus. As a descendant of Dutch immigrants himself, he likely fancied the idea of having a Dutch-bred circus girl as one of the tertiary characters popping up on screen from time to time. Regardless of who had the most deciding influence on clinching a deal with Miss Loni, she was offered a contract to appear with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey for the 1950 and 1951 seasons and soon set sail for the United States.

The ship departed on March 25, 1950, and the name "ABEEN, Apolionia [sic]" was first on manifest #42 of inbound passengers sailing aboard the *S.S. America* from LeHavre, France to New York City.[8] Her destination was recorded as "Ringling Bros. Circus Sarasota, Florida." Inked-in alongside the typed information, a more precise notation of terminus specified that Loni would be residing at the Forrest Hotel on West 49th Street, N.Y.C. when she arrived on American soil on March 30. Manifest #42 also shows five other "Aliens," as they were listed, who were en route to join up with *The Greatest Show on Earth*. Ironically, three of those five made up the Realles Trio, a foot-juggling act that would work opposite Loni, in another ring.

Making ready for the ring, Loni's assistant and life-partner Freddie adjusts the ruffles on her costume backstage at New York's Madison Square Garden, 1950.

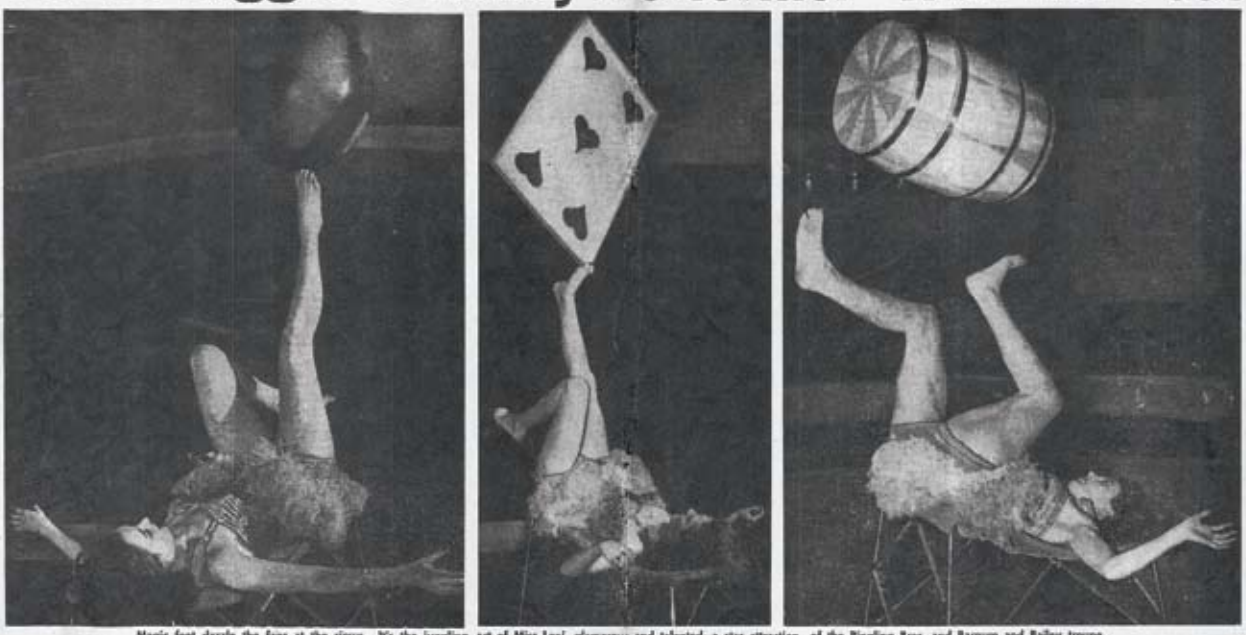
Loni made the voyage alone with five pieces of baggage – four of which were props. "I was a little seasick on the way over and thinking more about what I had gotten myself into than anything else," she commented. "I wasn't so sure if [being with] this Ringling thing was such a good idea… I felt a little nauseous about it all."[9]

Loni was, no doubt, concerned that she would not fit properly into or go over very well in a massive American three-ring show. She was accustomed to working on a theater stage or by herself in a one-ring European circus layout. Suddenly, she was being thrust into this gigantic collage of noise and color, where everything happened at once. On top of that, she would be working the first couple of weeks without her Fred Astaire-like assistant to help her with the in-ring transition of props and such. Freddie was tied up in Europe and would not arrive until two weeks later, sailing in on the *S.S. Washington* on April 13, already nine days into the circus's 1950 engagement at Madison Square Garden.[10] She was a bundle of nerves. But a week or so into the Garden run she became a bit more content and began acquainting herself with several of her circus colleagues. By the time Freddie finally arrived, she was much more acclimated.

In New York, as well as under canvas, "Miss Loni," who was billed as "Holland's Foot Juggling Wonder," worked in Display 16, Ring 3. Opposite her, in Ring 1, were the Realles Trio, "French Foot Jugglers Par Excellence," and in the cen-

"Holland's Foot Juggling Wonder" is shown here spotlighted in Ring 3 of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey at Madison Square Garden, 1950.

Circus Juggler a Handy Performer—With Her Feet



Magic feet dazzle the fans at the circus. It's the juggling act of Miss Loni, glamorous and talented—a star attraction of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey troupe.

Miss Loni Made Show Debut at 12

By SCOTT MORTON

Apolonia Alsem performs one of the most difficult acts in show business and one of the most unusual for a woman—or for a man, for that matter. She juggles with her feet.

As dexterous with her feet as other skilled performers are with their hands, this pretty and amiable Dutch girl is in the United States for the first time, touring with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

She is billed as "Holland's Foot-Juggling Wonder."

Apolonia—her family shortened her name to Loni and she's called "Miss Loni" in the circus—didn't exactly choose her profession.

She was born into a circus family in Amsterdam, and her father, Roelf, an acrobat and juggler, decided that she should be a juggler with the feet, an "antipodista."

SOMETHING DIFFERENT.

"Everybody was becoming acrobats. It was better to do something different," Loni said.

Her brother, Jannie, 18, also is a juggler and performs with their father's circus which plays small towns in Holland. Their mother is not a performer, but travels with the Circus Alsem, working in the ticket booth and in other capacities.

Loni's training began when she was 11.

"I made the practice after the school," she said. "Two hours a day, often more, sometimes less."

It didn't leave time for anything else. Not for the fun and play that are parts of a normal childhood. But Loni didn't know any other life and wasn't aware she was missing anything.

FOND OF MUSIC.

Now that she's grown up her chief recreation is music and it's a bitter disappointment to her that she can't play an instrument.

But there was never time to learn, and besides the family was never in one place long enough.

Loni's favorite composers are Beethoven and Bach—"Mozart not so much"—and among the moderns, Debussy and Gershwin. She likes symphonic music best and does not care for soloists.

She has to rely on the radio and phonograph for her music because she can rarely get to concerts. They come at the same time as her performances.

Loni was 12 when she made her debut with the Circus Alsem in a little town named Vlissenmeer. She wore long trousers of pink and gold brocade, a pink and gold bolero jacket and a pink beret.

That debut and her first American appearance, at Madison Square Garden, 13 years later, had one thing in common: she was extremely nervous both times.

The nervousness of her youthful debut soon passed. "For every hour there was another show." In those days she might appear as many as 16 or 20 times between noon and midnight, if there was a good crowd.

She was appalled by the size of the American circus.

The European shows, even the Circus Medrano in Paris, have only one ring, and Loni was used to working alone, with her own music.

She had no opportunity to rehearse at the Garden before her performance and she was confused by the lights and the noise.

Nevertheless, her act went off right. There was enthusiastic applause, but she said she was too nervous to hear it.

TWIRLS OBJECTS.

Loni balances, juggles and twirls various objects on her feet as she reclines on a cradle-like bench.

First a large ball, then a papier-mache leg, a flat wooden panel, a barrel.

At one point she balances a floor lamp on one foot, spins a barbell with the other and twirls a baton in each hand.

It was this feature which impressed an admirer who mailed her a note printed in a small boy's hand:

"Dear Miss Loni,

"I want to be circus. I did not believe to look at any of the other clues. I thought if you dropped the lamp it would blow up."

Loni played with the family circus until she was 16 or 17. Her first appearance outside Holland was in Germany where she entertained American occupation troops.

After that she played at the Cirque Medrano and in the scandinavian countries, in music halls and night clubs as well as circuses.

She learned later that it was in Sweden where John Ringling North's European representative, Umberto Sciobbitello-Bedini, saw her act. But it was almost a year before she heard from him.

Whether North ever saw her before she was booked, she doesn't know. After she arrived here fellow performers told her that North spoke as if he had seen her in Europe.

Was she eager to come?

"Oh, I was crazy to come!"

Now she is a little worried about returning. For five days of the six-day crossing on the American she was extremely ill though other passengers found the weather pleasant. She doesn't like to fly.

"I'd better stay here," she said.

Loni is 24, unmarried and very pretty. She has light brown hair, combed to the shoulders, clear blue eyes and a beautiful skin. She is five feet, three inches tall and weighs about 125 pounds.

She has to forgo recreations that other young women enjoy.

She does not dance or swim or play tennis because they're all bad for the leg muscles she uses in her work.

She even walks on tiptoe as possible. Perhaps five or ten minutes at a time; more than that she tries to avoid.

She can't wear high heels although, like most women, she thinks her legs look better with them. She has to wear flat-heeled shoes (or no heels). Her size is 2½.

LIKES AMERICAN MEN.

There are a great many English words that Loni does not understand, but she does well for a person who has just "picked it up." She speaks it with a pleasant accent. She knows Dutch, of course, and French and German.

Would she marry an American?

She might, because she likes American men very much. She finds them more direct in their attentions to women than Europeans.

She likes the way they dress, in good taste, but more informally than Europeans.

But whoever she marries—"He must be more clever than I."

And he must be in show business "so he would understand my work, my life."

She doesn't want children until she retires, for she wants to be able to give all her time to them.

She thinks she can go on performing until she is 30 or 35, depending on how she looks in 10 years. "Somebody is quickly old while another is not." She doesn't want to work when she is "old."

When she does have children, she will let them decide whether they want to go into show business.

For herself, is it worth it, despite all the things she has given up and the hard work?

"Yes, it is worth while," she replied.

"I am sorry for much things I missed but now after all I am in America and things are going well and I am glad, and yes, it is worth while."

IT'S AMAZING . . . Loni is properly impressed as Frank Cromwell pulls a sleight of hand gag. She is billed as "Holland's Foot-Juggling Wonder" and her unique ability earns her top rating. Because "everyone in the circus is an ordinary juggler or acrobat," Loni decided to do something different.

EDUCATED TOES . . . Miss Loni is proud of her amazing feet—and she takes good care of her talented feet. This is her first year under the American big top. But circus life is no novelty. Her real name is Apolonia Alsem. She made her debut at the age of 12, touring Europe in her father's circus.

FRIEND IN DEED . . . A minute out to fix the costume hat for aerial dancer Anna Belmonte. Loni was afraid she might be lonesome in the circus, America, she says, "is such a wonderful country." Loni would like to stay here, thinks she would prefer an American as a husband—when the time comes.

(International News Photos by Frank Jurkoski.)

Although the circus had already closed at Madison Square Garden three weeks prior, the New York Journal-American *carried a full-page feature about Miss Loni on Sunday, May 28, 1950. The show was playing Atlantic City under canvas that day.*

Loni's routine with a full-sized wine barrel was a grueling workout twice daily under the big top. She performed the trick with such finesse that audience members never quite realized how challenging the feat was. 1950.

ter ring "The Greatest Juggler of the Ages," Francis Brunn.[11] In print, under both Loni and the Realles' names, appeared the highlighted annotation "First Time In America." For the little Dutch girl whose father was not that concerned about ever hitting the big time, Loni already had. The name Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was synonymous with circus worldwide, and Apolonia Abeen was right in the midst of it all. And this was only the beginning.

Ringling's 1950 New York run was followed by another indoor stand at the Boston Garden, from May 9 through 14. Immediately afterwards, the show began its annual expedition under the big top, opening on May 16 in Baltimore and continuing for the next seven months. Playing a route through 32 states and two Canadian provinces, the tour closed in Miami on November 19, after 430 performances.[12] Loni and Freddie had ridden the rails north, south, east and west, watching "America the Beautiful" speed by. "We saw a lot of not much," Loni remembered, "But I was always happy to be doing the act."[13]

A couple of weeks after closing under canvas, the Florida-Havana Railroad Car Ferry transported several Ringling cars from the Port of Palm Beach to Havana, Cuba, where a slightly condensed version of "El Gran Circo Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey" opened on December 8, continuing for one month into the new year at the Palacio de los Deportes.[14] The ferry excursion transported props, riggings and animals over the waterway. The performers, Loni and Freddie included, flew in and back via Pan-American Airways. This was the second consecutive winter the Ringling organization had taken a show to Havana, and it was met again with great success. By the time "The Big One" returned to its home base during the second week in January, the entire cast and crew was gearing up to be in the movies.

Loni's beau Freddie snapped this picture in Ringling's backyard during the 1951 season. Note the two water buckets marked "Loni" behind her, to the right.

Anyone who made a snowbird's pilgrimage to Sarasota between the middle of January until about the end of March

Fred Van Voorden and Miss Loni Abeen, were posing for a circus fan in the backyard in 1951 when this photo was taken by Ringling's staff photographer Ted Sato.

Director Cecil B. DeMille, in hat with his left hand on hip, carefully studying Loni's moves through a handheld scope at Sarasota winter quarters, February 1951. His inscription reads, "To Miss Loni, a beautiful artist. With Appreciation, Cecil B. deMille."

1951 found themselves in the thick of more than they could have ever anticipated. Hollywood was in town. Camera crews, gaffers and movie stars galore had invaded to begin production on what would end up claiming the Oscar for best picture the following year, Cecil B. DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth.* DeMille, along with his staff, had taken up semi-permanent residency at Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's winter quarters, located on the eastern edge of the city. Mixed in with the actors, locally-hired extras, and Paramount Pictures' technical squad was the big show's own massive roster of employees, placing the Hollywood community within the boundaries of the circus's own municipality – all within the city limits of Sarasota itself. Amongst that populace dwelt "Holland's Foot Juggling Wonder" and her companion, and it was there that Loni and Freddie became acquainted with the eminent director.

A good portion of the film was shot in Sarasota. Many of those ever-familiar performance sequences were staged, rehearsed and ultimately recorded under Ringling's gigantic big top on winter quarters property where an abundance of additional lighting had been outfitted.

For the most part, it was obligatory that everyone contracted by the circus agreed to be filmed without additional compensation, be it in performance or just candidly wandering about the lot at any given time. Exceptions included stunt doubles who were paid extra and at least one star performer, Pinito del Oro, who refused to appear at all since her added salary demand was not met. To the good fortune of some, select cameo appearances and possibly even a coveted spoken line here or there would be included in various scenes. Both Loni and Freddie were bestowed numerous transitional seconds of screen time during the picture, perhaps stemming from DeMille's bias for their Dutch pedigrees. About nine minutes into the film, as Heston taxis his way through the big top in his Jeep at rehearsals, Loni is shown spinning the ball as he drives past her, upon which a voice calls out "faster Loni, faster." A minute or so thereafter, upon validation that the show would, indeed, play the full season, there is a close-up of her catching the ball, springing up from her bench, and exclaiming (in Dutch) *"Geweldig!"* or "Marvelous!"

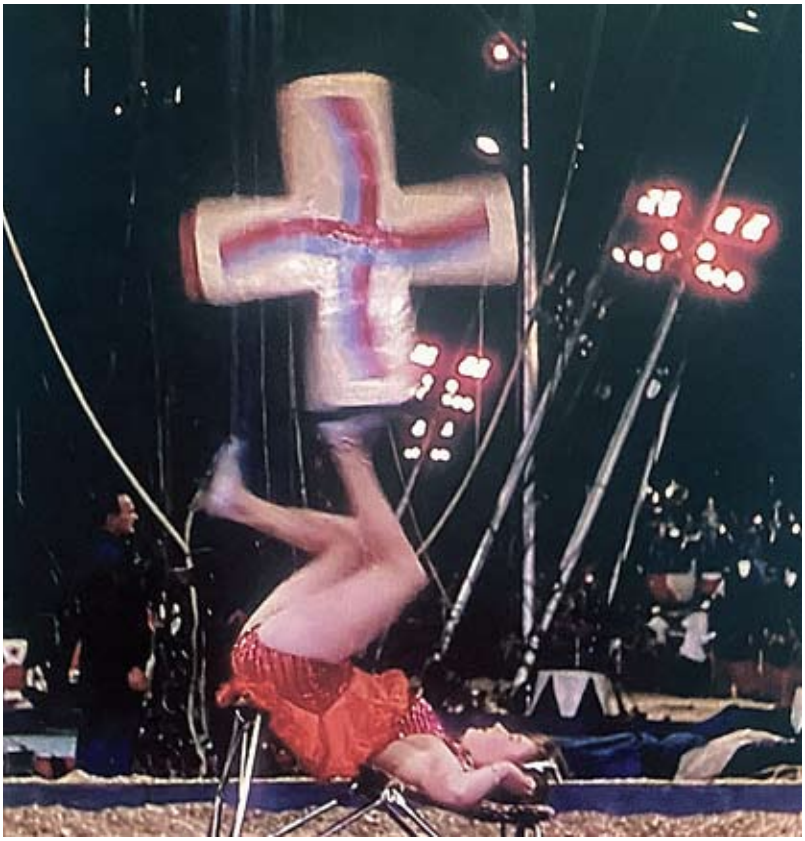
Throughout the movie, Freddie can be seen to Betty Hutton's left side, removing and taking away her elaborate feathered cape. And about an hour and a half into the story, after Sebastian misses the hoop and takes his ill-fated dive to the sawdust below, a wonderful succession of clips highlighting some of the show's featured acts includes several seconds of Loni running her four-pointed cross. Later, in the final minute of the closing segment, as Hutton belts out the reprise of Victor Young's snappy theme song, you can pick Loni out of the panorama, spinning her cigarette prop like a propeller. Freddie then removes and exchanges it for the ball, which she kicks so astonishingly high it is level with the knees of the aerialist performing a neck spin above her. DeMille himself also placed Loni as the third "rose" to the

right on the "American Beauties" float for the street parade scene, but an on-screen view of that particular lorry never made the final cut.[15]

By the time the real-life *Greatest Show on Earth* railroaded its way to the Big Apple for its April 4 opening at Madison Square Garden, DeMille was California bound with countless hours of cinematic gold. He and his crew would again reunite with the circus not quite two months later, first in Washington, D.C., then in Philadelphia, where the unloading, setup, and ambiance of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was captured on film.

A previous full years' experience with "The Big One" had to have made Loni and Freddie's second season out with the show more predictable and therefore endurable. Loni's greatest passion was doing the act. The love and respect for her act that her father instilled in her when she was a child were always there, and it did not matter whether she was with the biggest show on the road or a homespun outfit more reminiscent of her family's Theater Abeen. As for Freddie, he had fallen head over heels in love with America and all it had to offer, particularly when it came to show business. As the 1951 season continued and eventually reached its end, Freddie focused his attention on taking the fanciful footwork of Miss Loni to the next plateau. To him, *The Greatest Show on Earth* was a steppingstone to an even brighter future.

Spanning their two-year stint under Ringling's canopy, numerous encounters with various impresarios provided Loni and Freddie a variety of options to consider when the 1951 season ended. By



DeMille saw to it that the little Dutch foot juggler popped up on the screen a few times during The Greatest Show on Earth. *About 90 minutes into the picture, Loni is seen running her four-pointed cross for several seconds during a montage of circus acts.*

Freddie's lens captured another image of Loni with famous clown Jackie LeClaire on the set during the filming of the final scene of The Greatest Show on Earth. *Jackie, Loni and Fred remained friends throughout the years.*

fall, still riding the circus train from town to town, the couple began sending letters and promotional photos to potential agents and producers stateside as well as abroad, putting out feelers for work in the coming year. Quick to respond was Marcus Glaser, who worked out of the Chicago-based Charles Hogan Theatrical Agency, headquartered in the well-known 203 N. Wabash building downtown, which, also housed the offices of Polack Bros. Circus. Hogan's agency was the largest booker in the Midwest at the time, regularly providing variety acts to the Chicago, Oriental and Riverside Theaters within the city, as well as filling the bills at Paramount in Indiana, and the Warner and Standard theaters across Wisconsin and Indiana.

Marcus Glaser promptly booked Loni into Chicago's opulent Oriental Theater for a 16-day run scheduled to open Christmas day, 1951 – a little over a month after the circus closed in Sarasota on November 19. [On December 21, DeMille would send a friendly personal letter to Loni c/o the Oriental The-

AMERICAN BEAUTIES
11472-159
Cecil B. DeMille's "THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH"
starring BETTY HUTTON · CORNEL WILDE · CHARLTON HESTON · DOROTHY LAMOUR · GLORIA GRAHAME
with Henry Wilcoxon · Lyle Bettger · Lawrence Tierney · Emmett Kelly · Cucciola · Antoinette Concello
and JAMES STEWART. Produced and Directed by Cecil B. DeMille. Color by TECHNICOLOR.
Produced with the cooperation of Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus. Screenplay by Fredric M. Frank, Barré Lyndon and
Theodore St. John. Story by Fredric M. Frank, Theodore St. John and Frank Cavett. A Paramount Picture.
52/40

DeMille hand-picked Loni to be one of the three girls (far right) on the American Beauties float for the parade scene towards the end of his film. When Paramount issued promotional glossies to promote the picture, this image, which includes Loni, was one of them, even though the actual footage of the float during the parade was cut from the movie.

ater letting her know about the film's premiere and wishing her the best for her work in Chicago.[16]]

At the Oriental, Loni was the first of four variety acts on the bill that opened for vocal headliners the Ames Bros, popular at the time for their number-one hits "Rag Mop" and "Sentimental Me." *The Billboard,* dated January 5, 1952, reviewed the show:

> "Making her debut here, Miss Loni, a European importation who foot-juggles, unveiled several new wrinkles to this type of act, also drawing heavy applause. Gal has looks and wisely refrains from any chatter. However, she works so fast that some of her more intricate maneuvers are lost."[17]

The traditional formula in American vaudeville or European music hall was to start off every show with at least one fast-action non-talking act. In show business parlance these were referred to as "dumb acts," as they were verbally silent. Oftentimes such turns went unnoticed, due to late arrivers filing into their seats, obscuring the attention of those already in their places. But from that very beginning, with beautiful legs, a curvaceous figure, and astonishing skill, Loni went anything but unnoticed. And she now had not only *an* agent – Loni had *the* agent.

On Thursday, January 10, 1952 Loni and Freddie could be seen larger than life and in Technicolor upon the big screen in New York City. It was then and there that Cecil B. DeMille's "Mightiest of Motion Pictures," *The Greatest Show on Earth,* premiered at Radio City Music Hall, where it continued to be screened for the next eleven weeks. In his review, published in *The New York Times,* on January 20, 1952, film critic Bosley Crowther commented:

> "Within his established province of theatrical

> spectacle, Mr. DeMille has at last achieved a merger of the spectacular with the real. The circus, an actuality, presented Mr. DeMille with a subject that challenged even his skill at representing dazzle on the screen – and handled it in superior fashion. Indeed, looking back on his career, this film glorification of the circus would appear to be the one far-off divine event to which the whole creation of Cecil B. DeMille has supremely moved."[18]

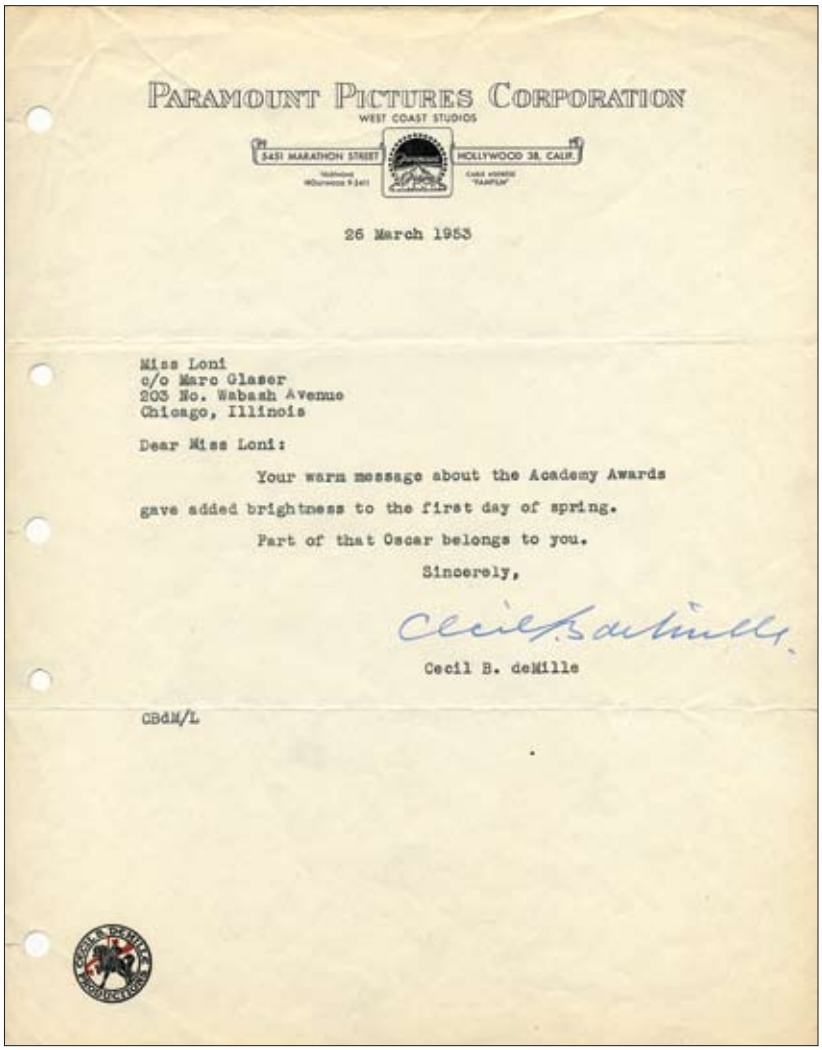
Entertainment journalist David Hanna earlier applauded the film in the pages of *The Hollywood Reporter,* on January 2, 1952, proclaiming "Hollywood and 'the children of the world' have been awaiting the pleasure of the one wizard capable of conjuring the singular magic of the circus – Cecil B. DeMille."[19]

The movie was an instant box-office smash, earning nearly $13 million in the U.S. and Canada alone.[20] It was the highest grossing motion picture of 1952, and although Loni realized none of that financial compensation, her on-screen closeups and name recognition dispersed throughout various scenes benefited her significantly. Once the film had been released, agents could push the act to their clients "as featured in Cecil B. DeMille's current blockbuster" – which they did. And it worked. For the bulk of 1952, Loni's educated feet kept busy, working night clubs, hotel showrooms, stage reviews, and occasionally even a television show like *Super Circus.*

The Billboard's "Night Club-Vaude Reviews" column for July 26, 1952 reported that "Minsky's Follies," as observed on July 4 at Milwaukee's Tic-Toc Club, "featured enough swift pacing, high caliber variety talent and a striking line in varying degrees of lavish costuming to more than please." A few short paragraphs later, under the heading "Fine Risley," reviewer Benn Ollman continued, "Miss Loni, looker from Holland, has successfully transformed a circus and fair act into a potent nitery [nightclub] turn. Her risley act was handicapped by [the] low ceiling, so she had to eliminate several of her best tricks, but what she displayed went over big. The low ceiling helped build suspense for her act, with the onlookers gasping when her props kept missing the ceiling by a hair with each spin."[21]

Offers were pouring in for the little "Dutch Treat" from all parts of the globe throughout the remainder of 1952 and far into the following year. Loni's popularity spread like wildfire, and with every next engagement completed, her reputation was growing faster than the speed at which she could run her four-pointed cross. In a letter ghostwritten by Freddie, Loni informed international theatrical agent Albert Tavel, who was hoping to place her into Paris' cabaret "La Nouvelle Eve" for the spring of 1953, "I had to postpone my original sailing date [back to Europe] of December 21st, 1952, due to advanced bookings."[22] It was a wonderful predicament for any variety act; Miss Loni was much in demand.

Loni and Freddie had signed on to be "exclusively represented" by the Hogan Agency for a year, with an option to renew the deal if both parties were satisfied with each other. In exchange for the artist's allegiance, they would see to it that the act was constantly working – for the right money and under the best circumstances. More than pleased with the firm's initial harvest of bookings, Freddie jumped at the chance to continue the working relationship for another year or two. Glaser readily maintained his end of the refreshed agreement, seeing to it that Loni foot-juggled her way clear through 1953 and 1954, as well. She was always playing something somewhere, be it on tour with the Harry



PARAMOUNT PICTURES CORPORATION
WEST COAST STUDIOS
5451 MARATHON STREET HOLLYWOOD 38, CALIF.

26 March 1953

Miss Loni
c/o Marc Glaser
203 No. Wabash Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Dear Miss Loni:

Your warm message about the Academy Awards gave added brightness to the first day of spring.

Part of that Oscar belongs to you.

Sincerely,

Cecil B. deMille

CBdM/L

Loni casually corresponded with Cecil B. deMille for a few years during and shortly after the production and release of The Greatest Show on Earth. *This quick little communication in response to Loni and Freddie's congratulations on winning the award for 1952's Best Picture was her personal favorite. "Part of that Oscar belongs to you." What a wonderful sentiment to convey.*

James Orchestra, doing a series of one-night concert dates for weeks on end; or on the fair circuit for Barnes and Carruthers, producers of headline grandstand shows like Bob Hope, for weeks and even months at a time. Also crowded between these elongated tours were countless appearances at nightclubs and posh hotels – the Empire Room at Chicago's swanky Palmer House, Bimbo's Club in San Francisco, or the El Cortez in Las Vegas – and even a television show or two.[23] It was a nonstop hectic lifestyle of which both Loni and Freddie never seemed to tire.

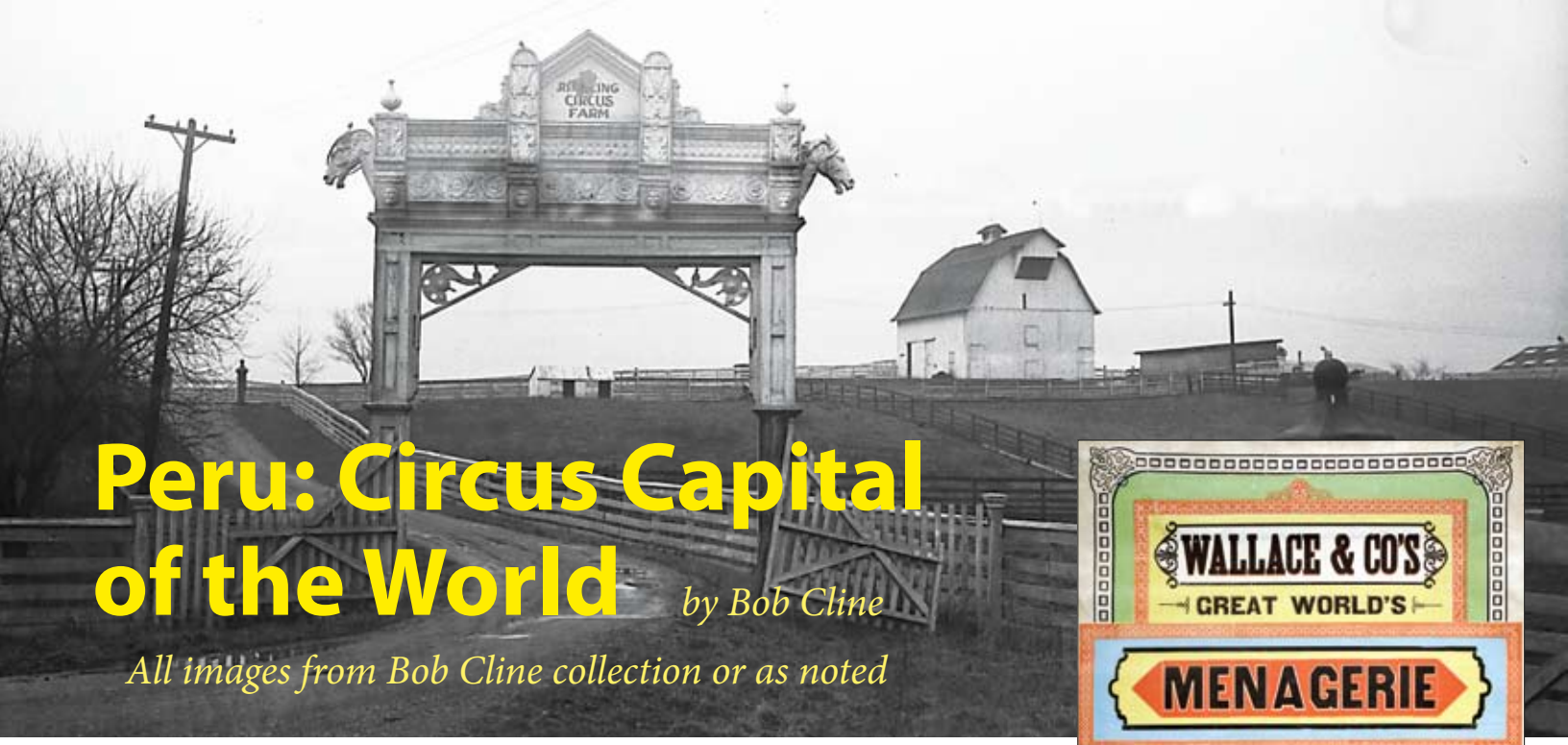
Meanwhile, back in Paris, after years of letters and telegrams, agent Albert Tavel had finally caught Loni "at liberty" and before renewing another extension with Hogan. Tavel had a six-month engagement ready to sign with the producers of "La Nouvelle Eve" if Loni would only say yes. Five years had passed since Loni and Freddie left Europe for their adventures with *The Greatest Show on Earth* and beyond, and the idea of now returning overseas to visit with family and to again perform in old familiar surroundings appealed to them both. A strong bond between Loni, Freddie, Charlie Hogan and Marcus Glaser had been well established and would again resume when the performers next decided to cross the Atlantic.

Loni flashes a coquettish glint on this Maurice Seymour portrait from her 1951 photo session. It was customary for a variety act to have at least four or five different 8 x 10 glossies in their agency submission – one pose, with the others being action shots of their routine.

Loni and Freddie were married on November 18, 1954 at the courthouse in Chicago. Their agent, associate and friend Marcus Glaser was witness to the ceremony. On Friday, December 24, newlyweds Mr. and Mrs. Frederik Van Voorden boarded a Dutch ship at New York harbor bound for Rotterdam. Miss Loni was heading home. **Bw**

Endnotes

1. Loni Van Voorden, personal interview conducted by Timothy Noel Tegge in Highland, Illinois, Mar. 15, 2007.
2. Circus Abeen *(Bezoekt het Circus Abeen Kermis Alhier)* handbill, c.1914-1918, Tegge Circus Archives.
3. Van Voorden, op. cit.
4. Loni Van Voorden, personal interview conducted by Timothy Noel Tegge in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, June 13, 1980.
5. David Volz. "Fred and Loni Van Voorden: A Life of Sawdust and Spotlights," *Highland News Leader,* Jan. 3, 1973.
6. Ibid.
7. There are inconsistencies regarding the spelling of Cecil B.'s surname. The *"De"* prefix is always capitalized whenever connected to his professional life; this includes his name on screen, in all publicity vehicles (posters, press-books, etc.), in interviews, and such. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences inscribed all of his Oscars spelling the name as DeMille. In his private life, however, he identified himself by using the traditional Dutch spelling of the name, in which the prefix remained in the lower case. His correspondence to Loni was always personal, and he therefore signed those letters as Cecil B. *"deMille."* Both are correct, and this article shows both to separate the professional *"DeMille"* from the personal.
8. "New York, New York Passenger and Crew Lists, 1909, 1925-1957: 7811 - vol 16955-16956, Mar 28, 1950." Citing NARA microfilm publication T715 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.). *FamilySearch,* familysearch.org.
9. Van Voorden (Hopkinsville, Kentucky), op. cit. 1980.
10. "New York, New York Passenger and Crew Lists, 1909, 1925-1957: 7817 - vol 16969-16971, Apr. 11, 1950." Citing NARA microfilm publication T715 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.). *FamilySearch,* familysearch.org.
11. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Magazine and Program, 1950 edition, p. 66.
12. *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus 1950 Route Book.* Sarasota, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, n.d.
13. Van Voorden (Highland, Illinois), op. cit. 2007.
14. Roland Butler, "The Big Show Goes to Cuba," *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus 1950 Route Book,* op. cit., p. 29.
15. Norma Fox, telephone interview, May 2, 2022.
16. Cecil B. deMille, letter to "Miss Loni," Dec. 21, 1951, Tegge Circus Archives.
17. "Night Club-Vaude Reviews: Oriental, Chicago (Thursday, December 27)," *The Billboard,* Jan. 5, 1952, p. 9.
18. Bosley Crowther, *The New York Times,* Jan. 20, 1952. Quoted in "Sound Feature: The Greatest Show on Earth: Reviews," *CecilBDeMille.com.*
19. David Hanna, "Review: *The Greatest Show on Earth,*" *The Hollywood Reporter,* Jan. 2, 1952.
20. Joel W. Finler, *The Hollywood Story* (New York: Wallflower-Columbia University Press, 2003).
21. Benn Ollman, "Night Club-Vaude Reviews: Tic-Toc Club, Milwaukee (Friday, July 4)." *The Billboard,* July 26, 1952. p. 17+.
22. "Miss Loni" letter to Albert Tavel. Jan. 15, 1953, Tegge Circus Archives.
23. "Miss Loni" business correspondence and contracts, Tegge Circus Archives.



Peru: Circus Capital of the World

by Bob Cline

All images from Bob Cline collection or as noted

The farm which Ben Wallace acquired in 1881 became the winter quarters of the American Circus Corporation and was later used by the Ringling organization for equipment storage and farming.

The Circus is coming. These four words were magic to young and old alike. For two weeks excitement built as the wonders of the world were plastered on walls and windows around town and the wait became all-consuming. When the circus arrived, joy abounded.

Those who lived in Indiana not only loved when the circus came to their town, but as the weather became cooler, some of those traveling shows came back for the winter and called the state home. The four Gentry brothers took four different circuses out of Bloomington, Indiana, and for almost 15 years, the area near French Lick and West Baden was home to both the Hagenbeck-Wallace and John Robinson circuses. Tented shows also wintered in Sullivan, Rochester, Washington, Terre Haute, New Albany, South Milford, Muncie, Kokomo, LaCrosse, Indianapolis, Ingalls, Frankfort, Evansville, Denver, Connersville, Brazil, Anderson, Cicero and Ambia.

The circus was a big part of the history of Indiana, yet the most significant piece of that story was found in the small town of Peru.[1]

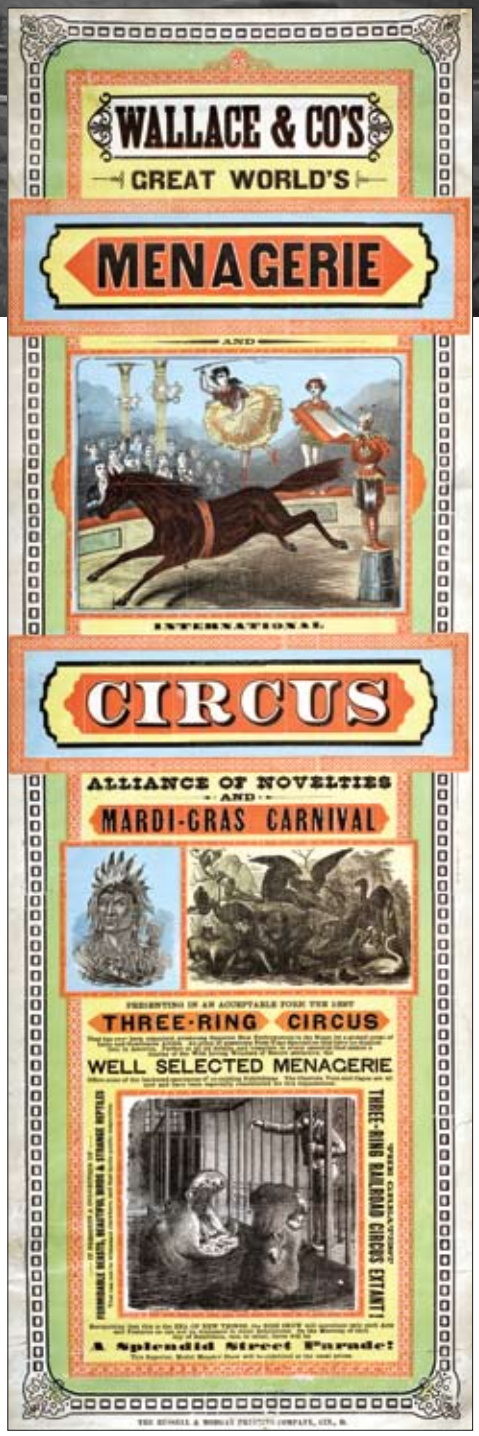
While the town of about 11,000 proudly embraces the title of "Circus Capital of the World," that claim was also supported by nearly 100 years of circus activity.

Ben Wallace

In 1881, Benjamin E. Wallace started on the path that made him the central figure in Peru's circus history. Wallace was already an accomplished local businessman who owned a livery stable and traded horses, when he saw a future in the circus business. After he bought his brother's farm in about 1881,[2] Wallace began actively acquiring circus materials and animals, starting with the purchase of the defunct Nathans & Co. Menagerie in 1883.[3]

Only a few months later, Wallace lost most of his investment when the building that housed all of his animals caught fire January 25, 1884.[4] Despite the loss, Wallace was not dismayed. Only three months later, on April 26, Wallace and Co.'s Great World Menagerie, Grand International Mardi Gras, Highway Holiday Hidalgo and Alliance of Novelties premiered in Peru.

It was Ben Wallace's first circus performance, and he was 36 years old. The new show, which was co-owned with James Anderson,[5] moved each night by wagons with



In the spring of 1884 Wallace & Co. gave its first performance in Peru.
The Ringling, Tibbals Circus Collection

all the livestock walking from town to town.

The general belief at the time was: "the more elephants, the better the circus." It made sense for a newborn circus to want its own elephants, and even before the Wallace Shows had completed its first season, Ben Wallace and James Anderson acquired a large male elephant from New York dealer, Donald Burns. They called him Diamond.[6]

Because Anderson and Wallace were both established business owners in Peru, the circus returned there and wintered in various buildings they owned. At the same time, Wallace started developing the farm he had purchased from his brother. The property was located about five miles east of Peru, and the first building constructed was a huge barn, built for training animals.[7]

When Wallace & Co.'s went out in 1885, it left as a wagon show, but was soon loaded onto a sidewheel steamboat which pulled four barges. The tour took Wallace and Anderson's circus from Pennsylvania to Texas before the season ended.[8]

Ben Wallace was constantly improving his circus and he soon bought several railroad cars to move his show across the country. Peru was the right place to do this as it served as the hub for three railroads: the Wabash, the Chesapeake and Ohio, and the Nickle Plate. There was even a large turntable in town for the multitude of railroad mechanical repairs.

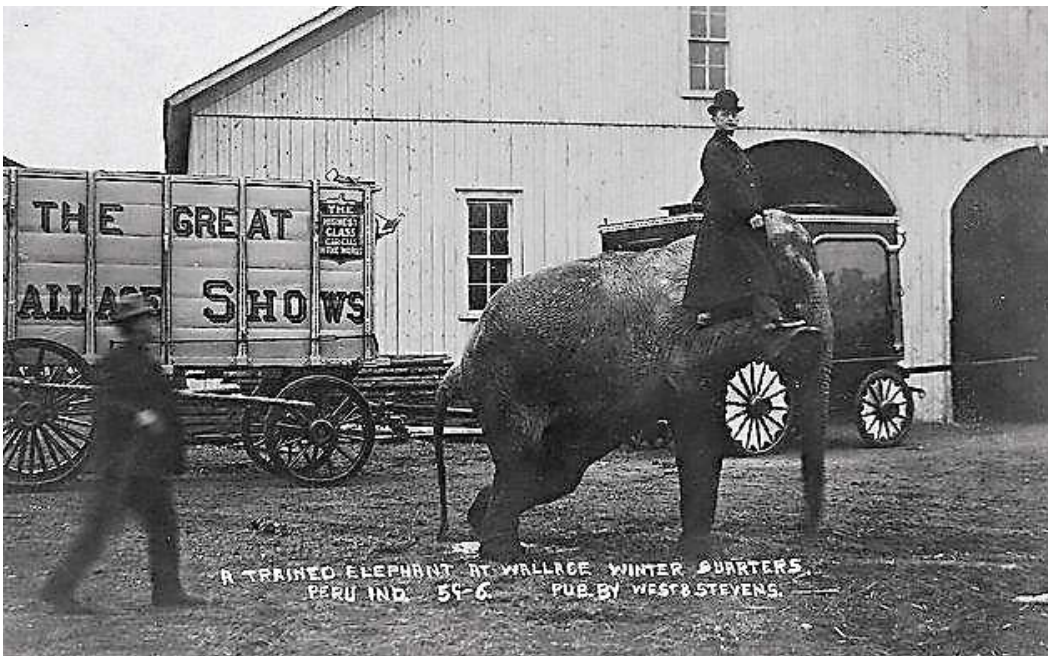
When Ben Wallace and James Anderson went their separate ways in 1887, the circus had become one of the most formidable shows on the road. Wallace now had a herd of four elephants and his performance was presented in a massive tent, 120 feet across and 270 feet long.[9]

One of the most significant developments in the Ben Wallace legacy was his purchase of a 220-acre tract of land from Gabriel Godfroy, chief of the Miami Indian tribe. The land, near the junction of the Mississenewa and Wabash rivers, became the nucleus of Ben Wallace's enlarged circus winter quarters. Immediately after he acquired the land on November 1, 1891, he started constructing barns for the animals, as well as shops to build wagons and store equipment.

After the circus had settled into its new winter quarters, *The New York Clipper* described the facility as having 11 buildings, including a 40 x 50-foot cat barn, a main building that was 200 feet long and 120 feet wide, a 110 x 50-foot elephant barn, as well as a stable for camels, shops, a cookhouse, storage buildings and two 750-foot wagon sheds. Of these structures, the residence, cat and hay animal buildings, as well as the elephant barn, were made of brick. The rest were frame, weather boarded and painted. Every building had a slate roof, and all were heated and illuminated by natural gas, which was piped three miles. A hot air pumping engine, with a capacity of 1,000 gallons an hour, supplied water and fire protection to the various buildings.[10]

Sullivan and Eagle Wagon Co.

For the most part, the circus winter quarters were self-contained, however there were times when others provided assistance and expertise. One of the show's most significant relationships was with the Sullivan and Eagle Wagon Co. based in downtown Peru. Wallace's livery stable was only a few blocks from the wagon factory so it made sense for both parties to work together. The more wagons that Sullivan and Eagle built, the better the quality, and soon Gentry Bros. hired Sullivan and Eagle to manufacture many of their small cages. The wagons built for bigger circuses such as the Wallace show or John Robinson were much larger than the average dray and many of them required a team of eight or ten horses. Unfortunately, devastating floods in April of 1913, ruined the Sullivan and Eagle company records, and the drawings and blueprints from 50 years of production were destroyed. Fortunately, some of the Sullivan wagons survive 100 years later in various museums and private collections.



Elephants were always an important part of Ben Wallace's circuses.

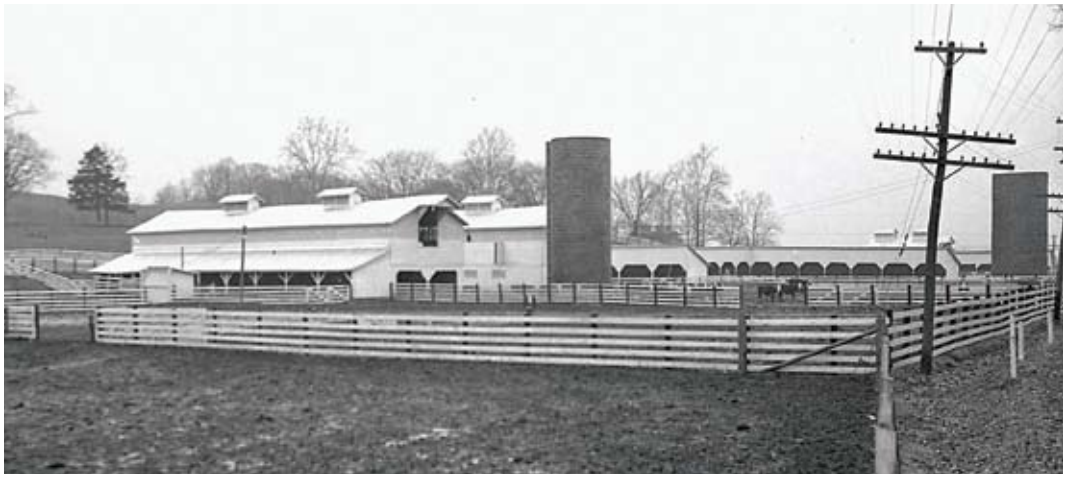
Tragedy Makes Good Businessmen

For the next several years, tragedy followed the show. The first blow came in Peru in the spring of 1898 when Diamond, Ben Wallace's big elephant, died while the show was in winter quarters. At the time of his death the elephant reportedly weighed over four tons and was valued at $10,000.[11]

In late November 1901, fire consumed the animal building that housed the elephants, cats and

hay storage,[12] and on March 28, 1904 flooding caused significant damage to the winter quarters as elephants were forced to stand in water up to their bellies.[13]

Despite the challenges, Peru's bankers did Wallace a favor in 1904 when they refused to accept his deposits. Wallace was making so much money on the road that he would ship nail kegs to the banks, however, the barrels did not contain nails. They were packed with gold and silver coins that had been taken in at the ticket wagons. When the local institutions refused to accept the deposits, Wallace started his own bank. The Wabash Valley Bank and Trust operated for nearly a century at the corner of Main and Broadway. While the bank's financial business took place on the ground floor, three flights up the circus wardrobe department operated year-round.[14]



In addition to serving as the winter quarters, the fertile Indiana farmland provided feed for circus animals as well as a secondary revenue stream from the sale of surplus crops.

As Ben Wallace was making a fortune in the circus business, two young Indiana entrepreneurs got the circus bug. When Jeremiah Mugivan and Albert Bowers pooled $3,000, they were able to create a ten-car railroad circus that they called the Van Amburgh Trained Wild Animal Menagerie, named for the early wild animal subjugator, Isaac Van Amburgh. Mugivan and Bowers learned the circus business as they operated the show from 1905 to 1908, returning home to Peru at the end of each season.

Even before he entered the circus business, Benjamin Wallace (1847-1921) was a prominent figure in Peru, Indiana.

Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

At the same time the Van Amburgh show was growing, bad news continued to swirl around the Wallace Circus and its winter quarters. On August 2, 1905, while the show was on the road, fire consumed the large horse barn, as well as the pony barn, hospital building and camel barn. The flames also destroyed 150 tons of hay. Damages were $15,000 with no insurance.[15]

With his future in the circus business uncertain, Ben Wallace put his entire show up for sale on December 1, 1906.[16] When no buyers came forward, Wallace returned to the road in 1907 and a few months later he had the opportunity to buy the Carl Hagenbeck Trained Wild Animal Circus.

After its historic run at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, the Hagenbeck show had toured the United States from 1905 until 1907 when it ran out of money in Mexico and was forced to close. For the purchase price of $100,000, Ben Wallace bought the complete circus, including all of the wagons and railroad cars, as well as the animals, and perhaps the biggest prize – the Carl Hagenbeck title.[17]

The financial success of Wallace, Mugivan and Bowers had a positive economic impact throughout Peru. At the same time the circuses were using the railroads for storage, repairs and travel, local businesses were supplying everything from bread and vegetables to paper towels and paint.

And Ben Wallace was getting rich.

Each year when the circus season ended, Wallace continued to make money from his bank, his horse-trading and his livery stable. He also owned several hundred acres of fertile farmland which allowed him to feed his animals and sell the surplus crops. As the years passed, Wallace continued to purchase various tracts of land, and in April 1912 he bought the 80-acre farm that adjoined his property for $17,000. The acquisition gave him ownership of more than 2,000 acres of prime farmland.[18] Ben Wallace was now one of the most influential people in Indiana's Miami County.

The New York Clipper recognized Wallace's success in the business world when it wrote:

> "Colonel Ben E. Wallace, purchased another slice of Peru real estate this week, and added to his various reality holdings. Including three square miles of the finest farm property in this country, upon which the Hagenbeck-Wallace Winter quarters are located, makes 'Uncle Ben' one of the greatest land proprietors in the State of Indiana. What with large holdings in banks, street railway lines,

As Ben Wallace's circus empire grew, additional buildings were needed to accommodate dozens of circus animals as well as workshops where props and wagons were built and refurbished each winter.

> department stores, electric light plants, stocks and bonds, gilt-edge securities, and the proprietor of one of the world's greatest circuses, Colonel Wallace 'cuts some ice' in this community, and there is none to begrudge him an iota of his prosperity."[19]

Despite his success, Wallace's empire was rocked when the Mississenewa River left its banks on March 25, 1913. The circus winter quarters flooded, and Wallace lost all eight of his beloved elephants with one floating into the town of Peru. He also lost all the caged animals from the menagerie and the performing wild animals. Most importantly, he lost the drive to keep going.[20] While he was able to lease animal acts for the season opener in April, only two months later Ben Wallace sold his Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus.[21]

A New Era Begins

On Wednesday, June 11, 1913, O. E. Cory, John O. Talbott, J. B. Warren, Edward Ballard and Charles Hagaman filed papers of incorporation in Indianapolis for the Carl Hagenbeck and Great Wallace Shows Company.

The capital stock of the new venture was $300,000 – $100,000 of which was preferred stock, and the balance of $200,000 in common stock. The officers of the new company were John O. Talbott, president; Edward Ballard, vice-president; and Charles E. Cory, secretary and treasurer. Cory would also serve as general manager of the new Hagenbeck-Wallace circus and Talbott would be assistant manager.

At the time of the sale, Hagenbeck-Wallace moved on 50 railroad cars and had 192 head of draft stock, 56 head of ring stock, 22 Shetland ponies, four elephants, three camels, zebras and 15 cages of animals. *The New York Clipper* also revealed that Wallace would be retiring from show business and that he had sold the circus for $100,000 in cash.

The article explained that John Talbott, who had worked for Wallace as a legal adjuster for ten years, had been given an option to purchase the show on May 15. He had little difficulty finding investors.

Among the biggest stockholders were W. H. Harrison, proprietor of the Davenport Hotel in Davenport, Iowa. According to John Talbott, the investors represented business holdings valued at more than $50,000,000.[22]

On Sunday, June 29, 1913, Ben Wallace said goodbye to the circus that carried his name and returned to his home in Peru. *The Clipper* concluded its story about the sale by stating:

> "Uncle Ben has long enjoyed the reputation of presenting one of the greatest aggregations in the world, and The *New York Clipper* has been assured

Carl Hagenbeck and Great Wallace Show Company
Common Stock, $200,000.00 Preferred Stock, $100,000.00
This Certifies that
Shares of the Common Stock of the Carl Hagenbeck and
Great Wallace Show Company, transferable on the books of said Corporation by the owner thereof, in person or by attorney, duly authorized, upon surrender of this Certificate properly endorsed.
In Witness Whereof, the Carl Hagenbeck and Great Wallace Show Company has caused this Certificate to be executed by its proper officers and its corporate seal to be hereunto affixed this
Carl Hagenbeck and Great Wallace Show Company
SECRETARY AND TREASURER
PRESIDENT
Shares $100.00 Each.

In 1913 Ben Wallace sold his circus to a group of investors led by Edward Ballard, Charles Cory and John Talbott. Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

by President John O. Talbott, of the Carl Hagenbeck and Great Wallace Shows Company, that a high standard of excellence will be maintained under the new management, and that there will be little or no change in the Policy of the Show." (Signed), Warren A. Patrick.[23]

Although Ben Wallace sold the circus equipment and animals, he did not sell the winter quarters. When Hagenbeck-Wallace returned to Peru for the winter of 1913-14 the new owners leased the property from Wallace. As soon as Hagenbeck-Wallace began its tour in the spring of 1914, the city's other circus owners, Jeremiah Mugivan and "Bert" Bowers, rented the property from Wallace so that their two circuses, Robinson's Famous Circus and the Howe's Great London Shows, could winter in Peru in 1915.[24]

Mugivan and Bowers Make Peru Their Home

Ben Wallace's business acumen had been closely observed by Mugivan and Bowers, and in April 1916 the pair traveled to Terrace Park, Ohio to purchase the John Robinson 10 Big Shows. The circus had closed in 1911 after several generations of ownership, and after Mugivan and Bowers closed on the sale, they sold the equipment to John Warren, whose firm constructed flatcars for circuses, and Ben Wallace.

Wallace then had the Robinson show equipment transported from Ohio to his Peru winter quarters. After Mugivan and Bowers disposed of the old circus property, their intentions became clear. Their prize was the John Robinson title, a name they had long admired.[25]

In 1917 Jerry Mugivan and Bert Bowers retitled their Howe's Great London Shows as the John Robinson Circus, a 45-car show. When the circus returned to Peru at the end of the season, Wallace had made improvements to the quarters. Among the additions were a new concrete floor in the 150-foot-long paint shop, and a barn that could hold 175 of the circus' finest horses.[26]

Although World War I was raging across the European continent, the John Robinson Circus had another hugely successful season in 1918 before it returned to Peru. About the same time that the show settled into winter quarters in mid-November, the circus world was shocked to learn that Hagenbeck-Wallace was in the hands of a Receiver and was for sale.

A few months earlier, Hagenbeck-Wallace had suffered a train wreck when an empty troop train smashed into several circus sleeping cars near Hammond, Indiana. At least 86 show employees were killed and 127 injured. The hospital bills alone had nearly bankrupted the circus.

When the Receiver's auction was held, the only bidders were the Ringling brothers and the combination of Mugivan and Bowers. The showmen from Peru bought Hagenbeck-Wallace for $36,100 and were immediately seen as being

The complex of stables, workshops and training facilities gave Jerry Mugivan and Bert Bowers enough space to house their American Circus Corporation during its expansion in the years following World War I.

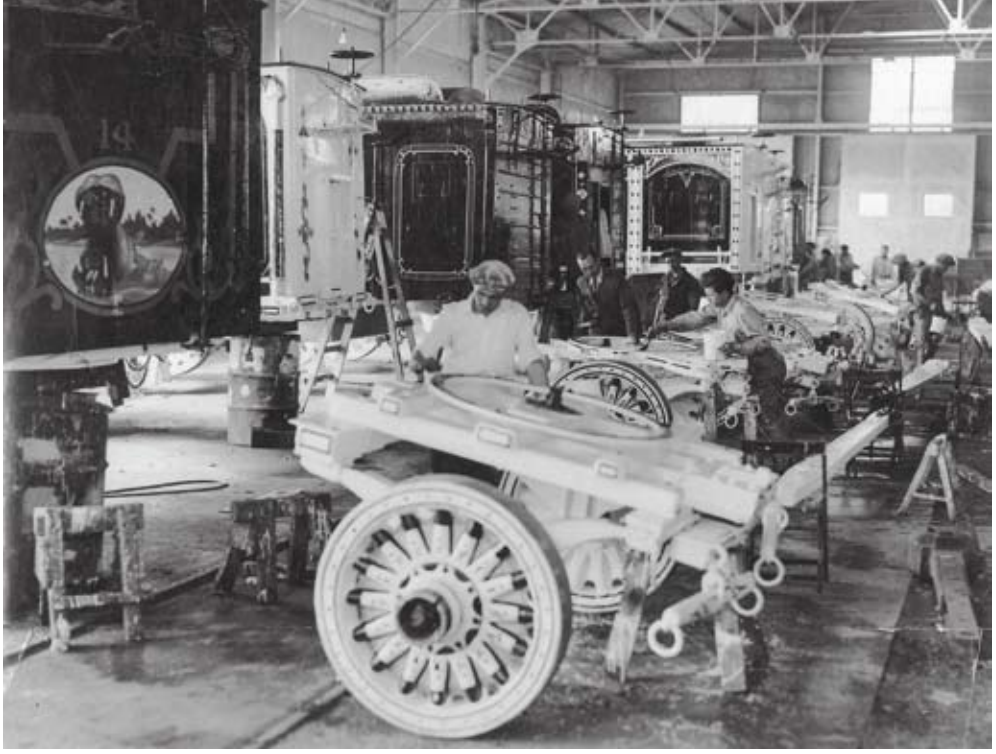
two of the biggest players in the circus world.[27]

The acquisition was only the beginning of their dynasty.

In 1919 Mugivan and Bowers took the John Robinson Circus on tour from Peru while the Hagenbeck-Wallace route began at its winter quarters in West Baden, about 175 miles to the south.

In 1920 the Howe's Great London Shows was again on the road, and on November 25 Mugivan and Bowers announced that they had acquired the Sells-Floto Circus.[28] A few weeks later came word that the pair had also purchased the Yankee Robinson Circus from Fred Buchanan.

As preparations were underway for the 1921 season, Jerry Mugivan and Bert Bowers now owned and operated five different circuses. It was a first, and as a result, Peru's place in circus history was solidified.



Some wagons were overhauled and repainted in the railroad car shops located several miles north of the winter quarters farm.

Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

American Circus Corporation

On April 8, 1921, the circus world lost one of its giants. "Uncle" Ben Wallace died at his Peru home that day. He was 73 years old.

With Wallace dead, Mugivan and Bowers stepped up their business model and incorporated the American Circus Corporation in the state of Delaware. The new corporation also included a role for Ed Ballard, the former owner of Hagenbeck-Wallace. Mugivan and Bowers admired Ballard's business sense and on October 21, 1921, the three of them purchased the 600-acre Peru winter quarters from the Ben Wallace estate. They also bought five acres in north Peru where the train cars were stored and repaired. The price paid for everything was $500,000 dollars.[29]

In 1922 the American Circus Corporation began a complete overhaul and enlargement on the Wallace Property. Two enormous barns were built, each about 150-feet long by 70-feet wide and 40-feet tall. The new barns were constructed end-to-end. The elephant barn was the southernmost building, and the wild animals from the menagerie were kept nearby, as well as the hippos with their own pool of water.

The northern building contained shops where old wagons were repaired and new ones were built. There were four blacksmiths working nearby, and the winter quarters' fire department was housed in the southern end of the building. On the west side of the property two huge horse barns were built, each of them about 200-feet long by 70-feet wide.

Following the devastating fires of 1884 and 1901, a number of precautions had been taken including an electric-start water pump that was installed in a building near the main road. The pump was attached to a large pipe in the Mississinewa River, and when charged, it dispersed water through the winter quarters' own system of fire hydrants. A century

Thousands of fans made their way through the winter quarters gates as the property became a tourist attraction in the 1920s.

Steve Flint Collection

later the two large wagon and elephant barns still exist, as do most of the fire hydrants.[30]

The expansion of the new Mugivan and Bowers winter quarters continued for the next several years with the final buildings completed in 1928.[31]

The new construction included a long building that was built between two of Ben Wallace's existing barns. When it was completed, the building was 250-feet long by 60-feet wide with 40 built-in cages on the ground floor and the entire upper level devoted to a shop that created and fixed the harnesses for the horses, the camel teams, the elephants and even the pigs that pulled carts during performances.

The American Circus Corporation had grown so large, so fast, that it had a surplus of animals and equipment. In January 1924 the T. A. Wolfe Carnival came to Peru and purchased two carloads of animals including an elephant.[32] Four months later The Mighty Sheesley Shows carnival also acquired a number of wagons and flatcars during a trip to the quarters.[33]

Jerry Mugivan was following in the footsteps of his former colleague Ben Wallace when he became a banker in the spring of 1924. Immediately after he purchased stock in the Wabash Valley Trust Company that had been founded by Wallace, Mugivan was elected a director of the bank.[34]

Throughout the early 1920s, the shows owned by the American Circus Corporation prospered and continued to grow. Hagenbeck-Wallace stayed in West Baden through 1924, while the John Robinson Circus and Sells-Floto both wintered in Peru. In 1922 Mugivan and Bowers leased the Gollmar Bros. title for their Howe's Great London Shows and when the season ended that show was taken off the road and most of the surplus equipment and animals were folded into the John Robinson Circus or sold to other showmen. The winter quarters also became a tourist attraction at that time and during the winter months, the general public flocked to the property. On weekends it was not unusual for the winter quarters to welcome over one thousand visitors each day.

The size and scope of the Peru winter quarters was recorded in this aerial view taken at the time that John Ringling acquired the American Circus Corporation in 1929.

As the shows improved, more animals were acquired overseas and shipped to the Peru winter quarters. In the winter of 1928, the American Circus Corporation took delivery of four giraffes, two elephants and a saddle back tapir. According to press reports, after that purchase, the American Circus Corporation's Circus City Zoological Garden was home to "the largest herd of giraffes in the world."[35]

The last big expansion of the Peru winter quarters began in the summer of 1928 when a large structure named The John Robinson Horse Barn was built along with two 50-foot ring barns used for training horses. A huge wagon shed was constructed behind the horse barn as well as a long, tall hay shed. A wooden storage barn was also built in a nearby field, fashioned out of the old circus seating that had been replaced by new seat wagons, which could be set up faster

and allowed for storage room to haul circus equipment.[36]

During the winter of 1928-29, Jerry Mugivan and Bert Bowers made two major acquisitions when they bought both the Al G. Barnes Wild Animal Show and the Sparks Circus. They also tried to acquire the Miller Bros. 101 Ranch Wild West, and while an agreement seemed likely, the deal fell through.[37]

As the owners of five major circuses, Mugivan and Bowers were a force to be reckoned with in 1929. That summer they negotiated a deal with Madison Square Garden that would put one of their circuses into the arena in the spring of 1930, a time when Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey long made its premiere in New York.

John Ringling was livid. With the thought that another circus might be able to slide into Madison Square Garden, Ringling called Jerry Mugivan and asked for a meeting in New York. Mugivan turned him down and said he would be in Peru if Ringling wanted to talk.

John Ringling made his way to Peru and began intense negotiations with Mugivan and Bowers. On September 16, 1929, John Ringling purchased the American Circus Corporation for over $1.7 million dollars. Six weeks later, the stock markets crashed.

The circus empire that had developed in and around Peru, would never be the same.

The Decline of the Circus In Peru

With money in the bank, Jerry Mugivan was now a retired circus owner. As he began his life of leisure, he reported to Harper's Hospital in Detroit, Michigan in January of 1930 for simple hernia surgery. Simple or not, things went badly, and Jerry Mugivan died January 22, 1930, only four months after he sold his circus empire.[38]

The Ringling organization quickly realized the benefit of owning the American Circus Corporation properties in Peru, and it soon began sending horses to the Indiana quarters where there was good quality hay all winter. By mid-October 1930, more than 1,000 horses were grazing in the surrounding pasture lands, but it was not only horses that were arriving in Peru. A nearby newspaper reported that "…an elephant, larger than any owned by the Sells-Floto, Hagenbeck-Wallace or John Robinson circuses has been purchased and delivered to winter quarters." The elephant reportedly weighed 8,400 pounds and stood eight-and-a-half feet tall. The newspaper said there were 39 elephants, 19 lions, 33 tigers, 6 leopards and a cub at the Peru winter quarters.[39]

At the start of the 1930 season, John Ringling owned Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey as well as the five shows that had been operated by the American Circus Cor-

In 1934 Hagenbeck-Wallace revived the street parade. The Harp and Jesters air calliope was one of several old circus wagons that were refurbished at the circus winter quarters in Peru.

poration. Once the outdoor season ended, the Sparks Circus was sent to Ringling's winter quarters in Sarasota. The show never returned to the road and much of the equipment rotted away in Florida.

On December 1, 1930, the Peru winter quarters suffered another terrible fire when the recently built John Robinson Horse Barn and the two attached training rings burned to the ground along with 300 tons of stored hay. The loss was estimated at about $140,000. There was no insurance coverage.[40]

At the end of the 1931 season, the John Robinson Circus returned to the Peru winter quarters, never to reopen. Sells-Floto and Hagenbeck-Wallace each absorbed equipment and animals from the now shuttered circus.

Sells-Floto would also close at the end of the 1932 tour, and by 1933 only Al G. Barnes and Hagenbeck-Wallace remained on the road.

In the early 1930s, lions and tigers and elephants were sent from Peru to Hollywood where they were used in several films. Clyde Beatty appeared in *The Big Cage* in 1933 and the following year *The Lost Jungle* was released. Some of the footage used in that film was shot in Peru.

Beatty was the star of Hagenbeck-Wallace in the early 1930s, and as part of the circus promotion in 1934 the Ringling organization sent a number of old circus parade wagons to Peru. That season Hagenbeck-Wallace staged one of the finest daily street parades in nearly 15 years. The circus was managed by Jess Adkins and Zack Terrell, veteran showmen who had worked for years on various Corporation shows. While 1934 was a moneymaker for Hagenbeck-Wallace, big changes were coming that would affect the circus business.

At the end of the season Zack Terrell and Jess Adkins both resigned from Hagenbeck-Wallace to start their own show. The new Cole Bros. Circus soon acquired property in Rochester, Indiana, only 40 miles from Peru. More importantly, Terrell and Adkins convinced Clyde Beatty to leave the Ringling-owned Hagenbeck-Wallace and join them as a featured attraction in 1935. Remarkably, the new circus had been established in only six months.

When Beatty joined Cole Bros., he had no animals to work, so new lions and tigers were acquired and trained. In addition, railroad cars were bought, repaired and repainted

Thousands of tourists flocked to the winter quarters where they saw performers rehearsing their acts and watched as circus animals were fed.

The circus winter quarters was a beehive of activity during the off-season as workers raced to build and repair equipment. Doug Konkle Collection

as wagons were purchased from other shows and a menagerie of wild animals was assembled.

In April 1935, the all-new Cole Bros. became the fourth railroad circus traveling the United States. That season Hagenbeck-Wallace added Forepaugh-Sells Bros. to its name as a way for the Ringling organization to preserve a show title they had not used in 23 years.

In 1936 several events happened that greatly influenced the circus scene in Peru. On January 15, Bert Bowers, died of pneumonia at his home. He was 61. A native of Kansas, Bowers entered the circus business in 1904 and for 25 years he and Jerry Mugivan had, at various times, controlled the Great Van Amburg Shows, Howe's Great London Circus, Dode Fisk Shows, John Robinson Circus, Al G. Barnes, Hagenbeck-Wallace and Sells-Floto, as well as Yankee Robinson Shows, Buffalo Bill's Wild West, Gollmar Bros. and Sparks circuses.[41]

The economic uncertainty of the mid-1930s kept Hagenbeck-Wallace in Peru in 1936, and even though the show was not touring that year, several animal trainers were hurt and hospitalized in Peru. In addition, the shows faced several lawsuits related to injuries to the public at the winter quarters and on the road, as well as a one-million-dollar claim filed by John Robinson IV against the estate of Bert Bowers for selling the John Robinson title without first making an offer to the Robinson family.[42]

That September, fire again swept through the Peru winter quarters destroying four large hay and horse barns as well as a horse corral located on the north side of the property. Several adjoining buildings containing elephants and big cats were also threatened. The fire had been discovered by a night watchman about 8:30 on the evening of September 25. Although the Peru fire department was summoned, thousands of tons of hay in the barns burned so rapidly that the blaze could not be extinguished. The firefighters devoted most of their efforts trying to prevent the blaze from spreading to the animal buildings. Damage was estimated at about $100,000, and the origin of the fire was never determined.[43]

The final blow for the Ringling empire was the death of John Ringling on December 2, 1936. He was the last surviving Ringling brother, although he had lost control of the show in 1932.[44] His nephews, John and Henry Ringling North, would begin managing the circus in 1938.

Hagenbeck-Wallace had remained at the Peru winter quarters throughout 1936, and after seeing little opportunity for a successful season in 1937, the Ringling interests leased the show to Howard Y. Bary, a circus manager who had previously procured animals and other attractions for the Ringling circus. The arrangement continued in 1938, however near the end of the season the Hagenbeck-Wallace circus collapsed financially while touring the west coast.[45]

Hagenbeck-Wallace was not the only circus that experienced financial problems in 1938. On June 22 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was forced to close in Scranton, Pennsylvania after the show experienced a multitude of labor problems.[46] By July 1 more than 300 horses had been shipped to Peru where they were sold to a man from Lowell, Massachusetts who had already bought 200 circus horses. The stock, which had been sent from Scranton to Peru, was then loaded on a train and shipped east where they were sold at auction.[47]

The most devastating toll on the Peru circus winter quarters occurred in the fall of 1938, when a group of surplus wagons caught fire near a large wagon shed. The building was saved, but many wagons were destroyed. The insurance company recommendations following the fire were recorded in the Ringling papers now at the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin, though the report does not specify the number of wagons that were burned or even the date of the fire.

After a devastating fire in the fall of 1938, some of the circus wagons still on the property were moved outdoors at the recommendation of the insurance company.

With no circuses wintering on the Peru property in 1939 and 1940, the focus turned to farming as well as the sale of surplus equipment and a few animals. In January of 1939, five railroad cars arrived in Peru with four camels, 15 elephants, and 40 horses that performed in the big show. The animals had been sent north from the Ringling winter quarters to perform at winter circus dates. They

The barns that once housed hundreds of horses and ponies became obsolete as the circuses moved to trucks and tractors.

would all re-join the Ringling circus later that spring.[48]

A New Beginning

Veteran wild animal trainer Terrell Jacobs had spent several winters in the 1930s at the Peru quarters where he trained his lions and tigers in the big steel cage. He enjoyed the Peru area so much that he built a lion and tiger training barn on the west side of the city near U.S. Route 31.

As a featured attraction on the Ringling circus in 1938 and 1939, Jacobs' billing claimed he performed in the steel arena with 40 wild animals, and at the same time activity was winding down on the property that had been used by the American Circus Corporation, Terrell Jacobs was just getting started. After he took out a small circus that played shopping centers and carnivals, Jacobs soon acquired several old wagons for his circus as he continued developing his large wild animal act.[49]

On February 20, 1940, a debilitating fire struck Cole Bros. while it was at winter quarters in Rochester, about 30 miles north of Peru. Two elephants died along with most of the caged animals. Some wagons, Mack trucks and tractors were also destroyed. Throughout the night, animals ran loose through the streets of Rochester until they could be rounded-up the next day.

All of the surviving animals were then loaded onto railroad cars and taken to the Peru winter quarters. Although the old winter quarters acreage and buildings were still owned by the Ringling circus, John Ringling North helped his competitor prepare for the new season by providing assistance, equipment and animals that allowed Cole Bros. to return to the road in April.[50]

Cole Bros. was the last circus to winter on the property that had been purchased by Ben Wallace in 1881. Under the ownership of Wallace, the plot of land at the junction of the Wabash and Mississinewa rivers had expanded to 3,000 acres, and although the land changed hands following Wallace's death in 1921, in the years that followed it had served as the headquarters for Hagenbeck-Wallace, the John Robinson Circus and Sells-Floto as parcels were sold off until only 500 acres remained.

By 1941 all of Ringling's subsidiary shows had closed and John Ringling North made the announcement that henceforth the 500-acre farm would be used entirely for farming and livestock breeding, with the produce shipped to the Ringling winter quarters in Sarasota, Florida.

That announcement was followed by the decision to

After Hagenbeck-Wallace and Al G. Barnes Sell-Floto closed at the end of the 1938 season, the Peru property became a storage facility for wagons and surplus equipment.

Thomas Donadio Collection

In late 1941 John Ringling North announced that the Peru property would be used exclusively for farming and livestock breeding. On November 26, 126 surplus and obsolete wagons were intentionally burned.

burn 126 circus wagons, many of them having once proudly paraded through cities and towns across the nation. The street parade, long a part of circus day, was by then considered obsolete. As the gilt and glitter on the wagons blackened and crumbled in the smoke of a huge bonfire, the contents of the wagons also vanished, and with it much of the circus history of Peru, Indiana.[51]

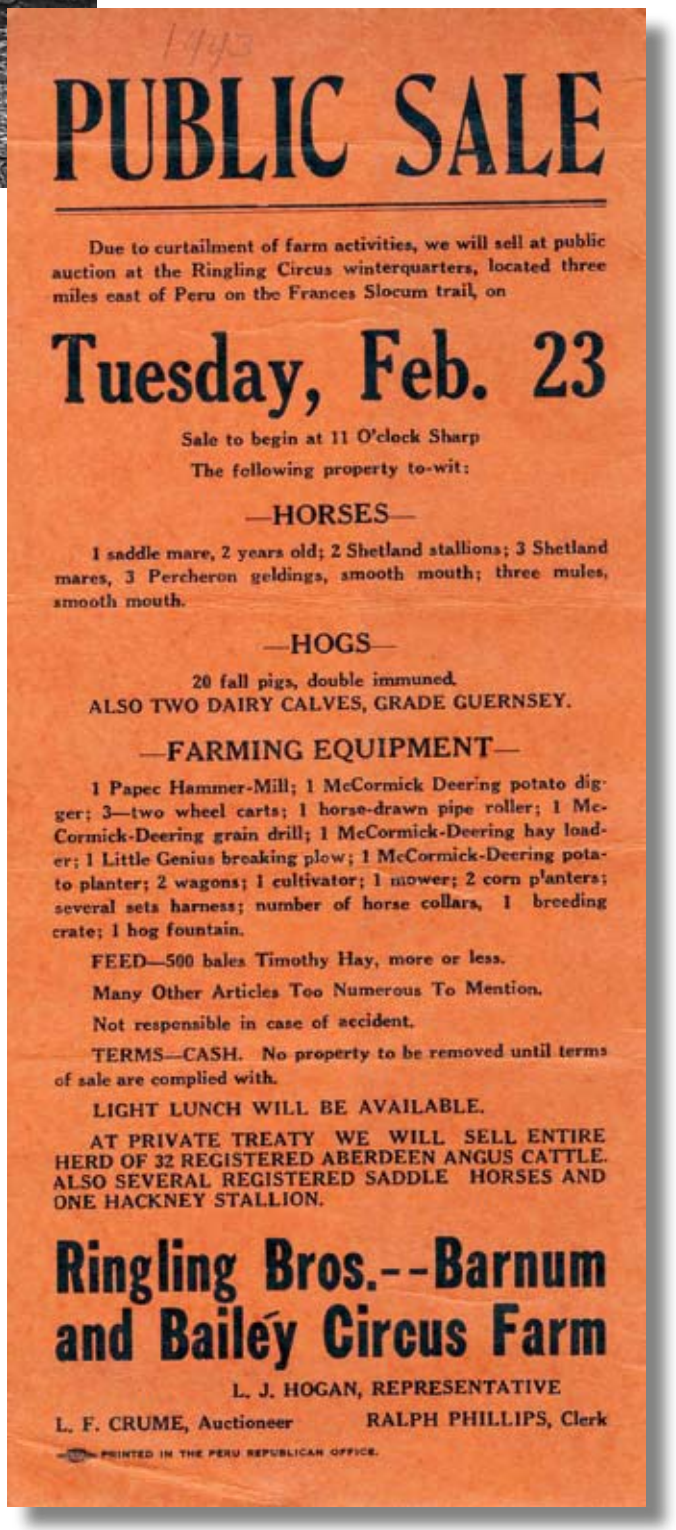
In early 1944 the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Board of Directors decided to sell the circus farm and began accepting offers for the property.[52] The winning bid was placed by Emil Schram, a Peru native who was then president of the New York Stock Exchange. Schram acquired the 496 acre farm for $71,500.[53]

Although the historic property that had thrived under Ben Wallace, Jerry Mugivan and Bert Bowers was no longer a circus winter quarters, the nearby Terrell Jacobs farm was thriving. In the 1940s Jacobs had started a business relationship with Chicago businessman Arthur Wirtz, the owner of the Chicago Stadium and the Barnes Bros. indoor circus. In 1945 Wirtz had a large barn built on the Jacobs property to house elephants, livestock and serve as living facilities for show folks.[54]

The Terrell Jacobs circus farm was eventually sold to Arthur Wirtz who also acquired the Cole Bros. Circus in 1949. After the railroad show closed half-way through the 1950 season, Wirtz had the equipment brought to the property where it was unloaded and abandoned. Although the train was scrapped, Wirtz kept the elephants and booked them, along with other acts, on a variety of indoor circuses. In 1954, Wirtz sold the Jacobs property, buildings, animals and wagons to Paul and Dorothy Kelly.[55]

More Circus Opportunities

The Kellys both had circus backgrounds and the purchase allowed them to start their own traveling show which they booked into shopping centers, carnivals and other venues



PUBLIC SALE

Due to curtailment of farm activities, we will sell at public auction at the Ringling Circus winterquarters, located three miles east of Peru on the Frances Slocum trail, on

Tuesday, Feb. 23

Sale to begin at 11 O'clock Sharp

The following property to-wit:

—HORSES—

1 saddle mare, 2 years old; 2 Shetland stallions; 3 Shetland mares, 3 Percheron geldings, smooth mouth; three mules, smooth mouth.

—HOGS—

20 fall pigs, double immuned.

ALSO TWO DAIRY CALVES, GRADE GUERNSEY.

—FARMING EQUIPMENT—

1 Papec Hammer-Mill; 1 McCormick Deering potato digger; 3—two wheel carts; 1 horse-drawn pipe roller; 1 McCormick-Deering grain drill; 1 McCormick-Deering hay loader; 1 Little Genius breaking plow; 1 McCormick-Deering potato planter; 2 wagons; 1 cultivator; 1 mower; 2 corn planters; several sets harness; number of horse collars, 1 breeding crate; 1 hog fountain.

FEED—500 bales Timothy Hay, more or less.

Many Other Articles Too Numerous To Mention.

Not responsible in case of accident.

TERMS—CASH. No property to be removed until terms of sale are complied with.

LIGHT LUNCH WILL BE AVAILABLE.

AT PRIVATE TREATY WE WILL SELL ENTIRE HERD OF 32 REGISTERED ABERDEEN ANGUS CATTLE. ALSO SEVERAL REGISTERED SADDLE HORSES AND ONE HACKNEY STALLION.

Ringling Bros.--Barnum and Bailey Circus Farm

L. J. HOGAN, REPRESENTATIVE

L. F. CRUME, Auctioneer RALPH PHILLIPS, Clerk

PRINTED IN THE PERU REPUBLICAN OFFICE.

In early 1943, the Ringling family sold the last 500 acres to Emil Schram, a Peru native who had become the president of the New York stock exchange. The remaining livestock and farm equipment was sold at auction.

The two enormous barns built in 1922 to house elephants and refurbish wagons are now part of the International Circus Hall of Fame.

for the next 30 years. During that time Paul and Dorothy Kelly employed a variety of animal trainers and other acts, and over the three decades that they operated the farm the property housed 30 different elephants. In 1984 the Kellys announced their retirement and sold the last of their elephants.[56]

The enthusiasm for the circus continued to run deep in Peru and local residents – many of them former circus performers – decided to start a youth circus where professionals taught children circus skills from the ground up. The first performance of what became the Peru Amateur Circus was held in 1958 and for more than 60 years local children performed in the community circus as they juggled, rode unicycles, walked wires and flew on the trapeze. A tradition that continued each year until the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020.[57]

In 1982, local residents embraced another opportunity to keep the circus tradition alive in the Peru community. When the original Circus Hall of Fame in Sarasota closed in 1980, a 501c3 not-for-profit was created as The International Circus Hall of Fame.[58] In 1982 the group bought the Florida museum's collection and relocated it to the old Ben Wallace farm. The first wagon to arrive was the Sig Sautelle Band Chariot that had been built in Peru in 1886 by the Sullivan and Eagle Wagon Co. The rest of the collection arrived from Florida by rail in 1987.

Since 1992, The International Circus Hall of Fame has been open to the public, housed at the historic Peru winter quarters in the five remaining American Circus Corporation buildings, all designated as National Historic Landmarks.[59]

For more than 135 years, Peru, Indiana has been tied to the history of the circus in America. From Ben Wallace to Jerry Mugivan, to Terrell Jacobs and Paul Kelly, each of them overcame a multitude of struggles and challenges so that they could provide laughter, and excitement, as well as thrills and chills to an American public that was fascinated with a world that came to town only once a year.

That circus was here today and gone tomorrow, and although it has been decades since elephants were based on the property, or a horse got

A once-proud weathered cage wagon silently tells of glorious days gone by.

new shoes from a circus blacksmith, the history of the Peru winter quarters has continued in the same buildings where that story first unfolded, as well as through the performances of local children who continue to add to the legacy of their community as "Circus Capital of the World." Bw

About the author

Bob Cline started his circus life as a Junior Circus Model Builder at the age of 12. After graduating from high school, he went on the road with Circus Kirk and Boas Bros. Circus where he performed an aerial cradle act for three years, presented a comedy low wire act and also appeared in the side show. He later owned his own tiger act that he presented on Rudy Bros. Circus, as well as at various fairs and animals parks before ending that career in 1994. Bob began researching various circus history subjects shortly thereafter. He has authored an e-book called *America's Elephants,* published several articles in *Bandwagon* and *Carnival Midway,* and now serves as Treasurer and historian of the Circus Hall of Fame in Peru, Indiana.

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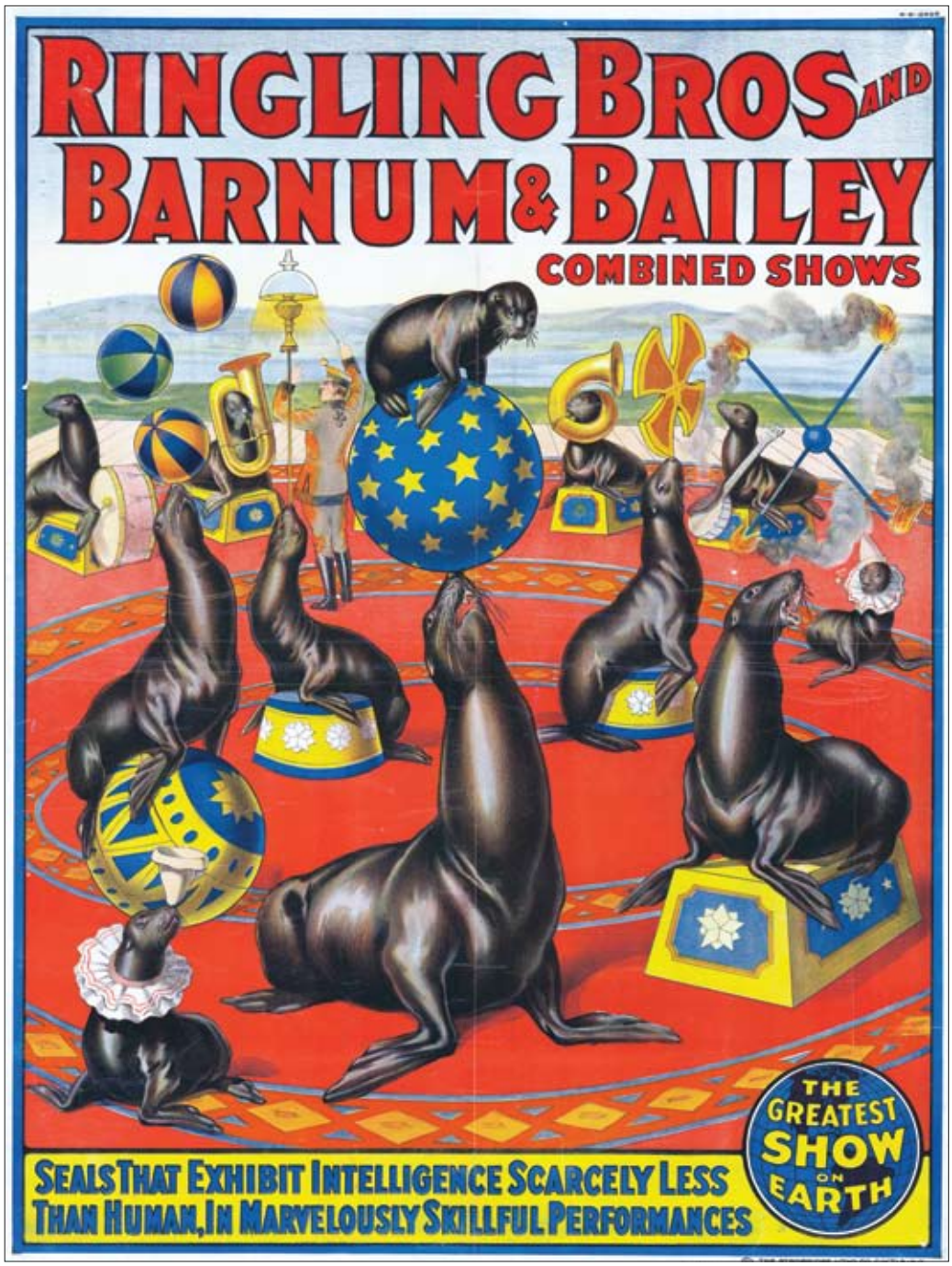
The Huling Brothers and Their Circus Sea Lions

by Gary Bohan, Jr.

Frank, Mark and Ray Huling were all young adults in 1907 when they paid a visit to a family friend – their uncle's wife's brother. Upon arriving, they were greeted by a troupe of trained seals. ("Seal" in this case means "sea lion." Sea lions are more social, more physically mobile on land, and better suited for training. At the time, the animal exhibition world often used the terms *seal* and *sea lion* interchangeably, as will be done here.) It so happened the family friend was Captain Thomas Webb, one of the first seal trainers in the United States. For years, Webb and his seal act had traveled around the world and had performed in the United States with leading circuses such as Ringling Bros. Webb eventually settled near Buffalo, in Tonawanda, New York, where he set up a shop called "Captain Webb's Educated Seals and Sea Lions." Webb offered jobs to the three Huling brothers that day. And just like that, they became assistant seal trainers. Years later, when asked why, Mark quipped, "We were so very young, we didn't know any better."[1]

Tonawanda Seal Training Capital of the World

Although Webb was one of the earliest U.S. seal trainers, he had mentored under a man named C. F. Adams, who later said, "Back in 1884, I introduced what was then a novelty, in the form of a school of trained seals, which were the first


RINGLING BROS AND
BARNUM & BAILEY
COMBINED SHOWS
SEALS THAT EXHIBIT INTELLIGENCE SCARCELY LESS
THAN HUMAN, IN MARVELOUSLY SKILLFUL PERFORMANCES
THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

The "seemingly impossible feats" of the Huling sea lions were part of the 1919 program when the Ringling brothers combined their two colossal circuses. Huling acts delighted Ringling-Barnum audiences for a decade, this Strobridge two-sheet poster dating from 1924.
Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

to be seen on a stage in the United States."[2] Seven years later, Adams befriended Webb and introduced him to seal training. During that fall of 1891, they toured and played fairs and museums. Afterward, Adams gave Webb his seals, putting Webb on the path to becoming a renowned seal trainer.

Having settled in Tonawanda in the early 1900s, Captain Webb routinely enlisted young locals, green in the area of animal training, to be his assistants, turning Tonawanda into the seal-training capital of the world. Tonawanda was home to four training quarters – Captain Webb's, two others run by prior Webb assistants, and another run by three nephews of Webb. The four facilities supplied over two-thirds of all performing seals worldwide, about 75 new trainees a year. It proved to be a fertile learning environment for the three young Huling brothers, who quickly honed their skills.

Mark Huling with Sharkey the sea lion, 1944.

Gary Bohan, Jr. Collection

Frank Huling took to seal training with unerring speed and ability. Within a year, he was manager of Webb's operation.[3] Frank and his brother Mark soon went on their first big trip. With seals and props, they left for Germany. As was later noted, "They had played Circus Busch in Berlin for only a month, when their tremendous success netted them contracts, booking them for two solid years."[4] Frank remained overseas, where he achieved celebrity for his presentation of sea lions. Mademoiselle Mangen, the French president of the Society for the Protection of Animals, wrote of Frank, "I have much pleasure in announcing that owing to the way you present and treat your animals, your act is really a treat to watch. I have never seen animals better trained than those, and they seem to have a great affection for you."[5]

Frank returned from Europe after two years. His seal-training skills now rivaled if not exceeded those of Captain Webb. For the next two years, Webb and Frank toured with Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Big United Shows, the third largest circus in the country, exceeded only by the Ringling Bros. and the Barnum & Bailey shows; all three of which were owned by the Ringling family, and all three of which toured separately. Webb and Frank were among the highest-paid acts with Forepaugh-Sells. During the 1911 season, each earned $250 a week, about $7,000 in today's dollars.[6] Following that season, the Ringlings discontinued operating Forepaugh-Sells and offered Frank a contract to be a featured attraction for the upcoming season with Ringling Bros. *World's Greatest Shows.* It was the break of a lifetime.

Ringling Brothers

Press agents spared no superlatives in advertising the new attraction. "Capt. Huling is exhibiting with Ringling Brothers' circus two troupes of seals which are the most remarkable examples of animal education ever presented."[7] They are "vastly more accomplished in their performances than any human circus actor that ever breathed."[8]

The Ringling Bros. 1912 season opened at the Chicago Coliseum. Display No. 5 featured seal troupes performing on two stages. Frank presented on one stage, and Mark on the other. *Variety* wrote, "The Huling animals pulled a hit [and] made their exit to big applause."[9] Frank and Mark returned to Ringling the next year. The circus again opened in Chicago. "Nothing but congratulations can be bestowed on the Messrs. Ringling for the show that has just made its bow to the Windy City," a critic reported. He wrote of the Huling seals, "The animals gave a marvelous performance, and were highly appreciated."[10]

The following year, the Hulings set up quarters in Kingston, New York, located 90 miles north of New York City. Kingston had also been the winter quarters for the Hunt Bros. Circus, though the Hunts had departed by the time the Hulings arrived. Charles T. Hunt – a Kingston native and longtime operator of his successful circus – would later befriend the Hulings, whose first animals arrived in Kingston in October 1914.

Down Under with Wirth Brothers

Frank Huling soon found an opportunity on another continent. Wirth Brothers, the oldest and largest circus in Australia, offered him a contract for their 1915-16 season after having seen him in England at the Blackpool Tower Circus. The show's sensation that year was to be family member May Wirth, renowned for doing forward and backward somersaults on a galloping horse. Her return to Australia followed four years abroad, where she had been a top draw with Barnum & Bailey. But much to everyone's surprise, most notably May, it was another equestrian rider who received the highest praise.

Night after night, Frank's star seal, Mascot, balanced and spun objects while riding a pony. A Melbourne journalist

CAPT. WEBB'S
WONDERFUL SEAL AND SEA LION BAND
THE MOST MARVELOUS OCEANIC ACTORS OF THE AGE.
PLAYING UPON MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND PERFORMING STARTLING TRICKS.

Capt. Thomas Webb obtained international distinction with his musical sea lion act. The Huling brothers entered the business when they became Webb's assistants in 1907. The Courier Co., one sheet lithograph, c.1898. The Ringling, Tibbals Circus Collection

wrote, "Nothing in Wirth's Circus programme this year has so caught popular interest as the wonderful performances of Captain Huling's seals. They simply eclipse all anticipation of what might be expected."[11] Another paper wrote that "Captain Huling's seals were the star attraction, Mascot, the riding seal, making a special appeal." Yet another newspaper wrote that "Huling's seals mark quite a new departure in performing animals. Their intelligence is human, but the feat they perform is superhuman."[12]

The circus next went to Tasmania, where a critic wrote, "One can hardly believe that anything has been more amazing, more interesting, more wonderful than the exhibition by Captain Frank Huling's trained seals and sea lions."[13] Onward the act went. Newspapers declared the seals "the most wonderful act ever in New Zealand. All Auckland is talking of it."[14] Returning to Australia, the circus played at the grand opening of the Sydney Hippodrome, where critics professed the seals "The Sensation of Sydney."[15]

Not forgotten is May Wirth, today considered the greatest circus bareback horse rider of all time. At age 75, long after her career was over, Wirth spoke of the seals upstaging her that year in Australia. "And oh, that got my nanny goat."[16]

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey

By 1919 Frank Huling had established himself as a world-class expert on sea lions. That year, literary journals and newspapers throughout the United States and Britain published an article about California sea lions that featured someone the article claimed, "probably knows more about them than any man alive."[17] That someone was Frank Huling.

World War I had ended the prior November, and the article revealed that "The British Government has just permitted the news to leak that seals were trained to hunt German submarines, and they achieved some remarkable suc-

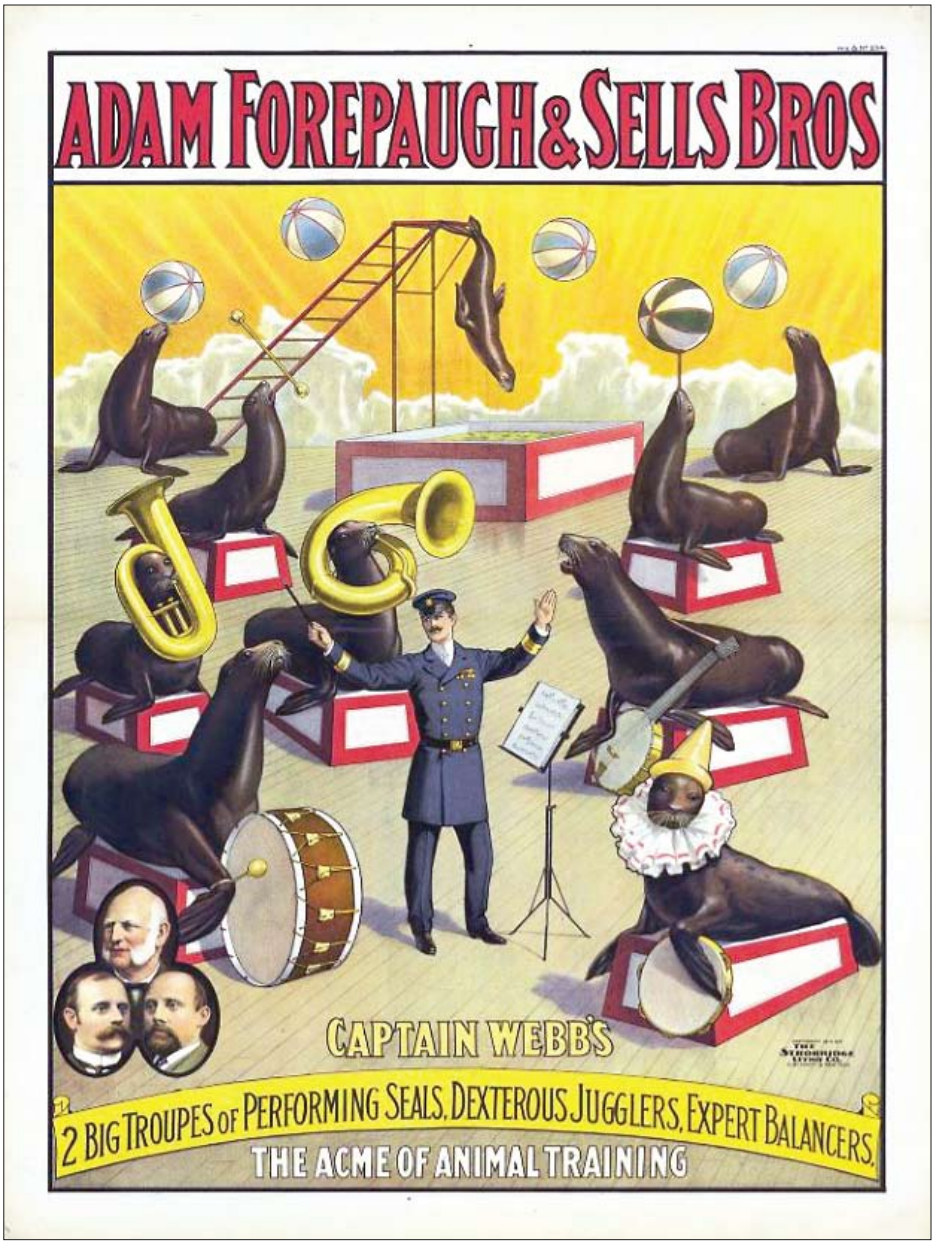
cesses." The animals were taught to detect the noise of a submarine propeller. They would swim out to the target with a red float attached so that a British patrol boat could locate the enemy vessel, drop a depth bomb, and destroy the submarine. Frank Huling noted that, "Considering the average speed of a submarine to be about twelve to fourteen miles an hour, it appears to me that the full-grown sea-lion can easily catch…a submarine if within reasonable distance from the start." (It is unknown to what extent Frank was involved in the wartime training effort. The person most often credited was Frank's counterpart in Britain, Joseph Woodward, who later stated that the training of sea lions to hunt German submarines was ultimately unsuccessful because they were easily distracted by schools of fish.[18])

During that same year, the Ringlings famously joined their two circuses into Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, *The Greatest Show on Earth.* It debuted at Madison Square Garden in what must have been an awkward reunion of sorts for the Huling sea lions and May Wirth, both of whom were featured acts: May was listed as Display No. 5; the Huling sea lions were part of Display No. 12, providing "an exhibition of seemingly impossible feats."[19]

For the next decade, Huling sea lions were an annual attraction with Ringling-Barnum. Frank eventually retired, but his brother Mark kept the act alive with the help of relatives and other assistants. With Frank retired, Mark assumed the helm as the industry's leading trainer. *The Billboard* proclaimed that Mark was "known as the 'seal king' in circus channels."[20] At times, Mark presented a staggering five troupes of sea lions, 20 in all. Some of the animals achieved a modicum of fame, most notably, Neptune (a.k.a. Big Nep) and Major. Speaking of the latter, *Variety* wrote, "With its tail resting on the side of a special saddle, the sea lion did his tricks on the back of a circling horse. A novelty, perhaps the best yet, thought out for such animals."[21]

Throughout the 1920s, Mark worked with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey alongside some of the most famous animal trainers in circus history. Once asked if seals were the smartest of all animals, Mark replied,

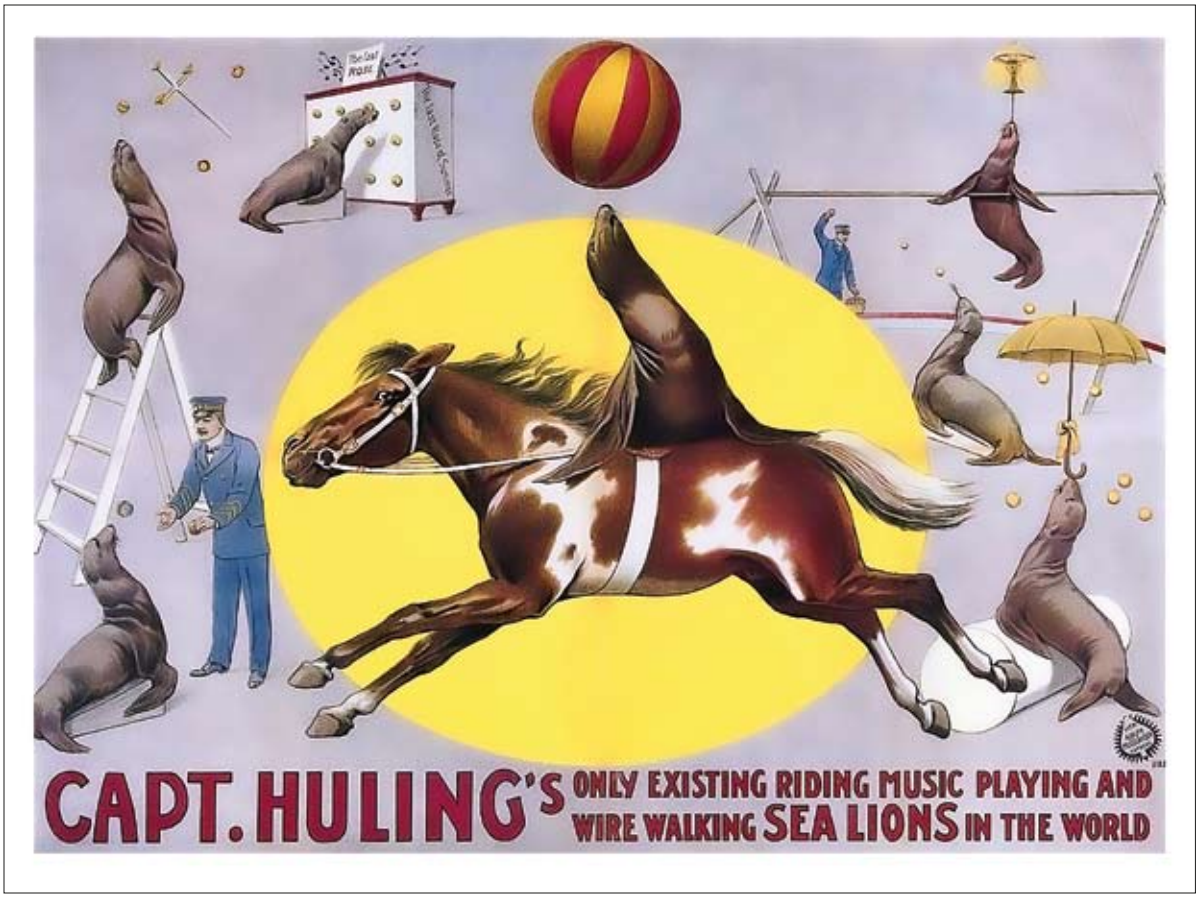
> "Listen, I've just about got to believe it. Talk to 'most any seal-goofy chap and he'll swear it's a fact. Query Mabel Stark and she'll tell you that once you get to know tigers, you'll agree they're the wisest heads in the business. Consult George Denman and he'll point to the elephants; or hunt up the Pallenbergs and they'll say 'Bears.' It's my personal opinion that if a trainer doesn't make his head work that way he might as well put the pedestals, tubs, and teeter boards in the storehouse and go to farming."[22]


ADAM FOREPAUGH & SELLS BROS
CAPTAIN WEBB'S
2 BIG TROUPES OF PERFORMING SEALS, DEXTEROUS JUGGLERS, EXPERT BALANCERS.
THE ACME OF ANIMAL TRAINING

Captain Webb and Frank Huling each presented sea lion acts on Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. in 1910 and 1911. Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library, Joseph F. Stern, Jr. Cincinnati Room Collection

Bertram Mills Circus at Olympia

While Frank and Mark Huling were busy working with Ringling, their brother Ray was busy innovating. Instead of presenting a group of sea lions, as was typical, he presented a single sea lion, a comedian, one who went by the name



Hamburg, Germany's Adolph Friedlander print shop created this 1914 poster for Capt. Frank Huling's sea lion performances. The Best Collection, The Collections of The University of Amsterdam

"Charlie." Named after Charles Ringling (who was often affectionately referred to as "Mr. Charlie" by his employees), Charlie the sea lion started in a Ringling troupe, then went solo and became the era's most famous sea lion. For years, Ray and Charlie worked big-time vaudeville circuits and later also starred in short films after the advent of talkies.

In 1927, Mark Huling and Charlie went to London to perform with the Bertram Mills Circus at Olympia. Although Ray was Charlie's main trainer, Mark had worked up a bit with Charlie playing "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" on tin horns. While in London, Charlie was to perform Great Britain's national anthem, "God Save the Queen," a melody of rather convenient choice, it being identical to "My Country, 'Tis of Thee." A poster read: "Charlie the Musical Sea-Lion Presented by Captain Huling, and Twenty Other Sensational Novelties." Included in the circus souvenir program was a full-page picture of Mark and Charlie; Mark's bio headed the personalia section.

Fortunately, and rather astonishingly, an Edison Bell 78-rpm recording documents an actual performance. Side A opened with an announcement: "This is Bertram Mills speaking at Olympia, London. I hope you will all enjoy listening to my circus."[23] The show itself opened with a rousing concert band version of "The

The Wirth's Circus that played Otago, New Zealand in 1915 included Frank Huling's amazing sea lions. *Otago Witness* photo

Liberty Bell March," known by many today as the theme song for the television show *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Side B ended with Charlie. The circus ringmaster addressed the audience: "My Lords . . . ladies . . . and gentlemen. (Pause) Introducing the most wonderful achievement in sea lion training. (Pause) The sea lion (pause) will actually play the national anthem (pause) without any mechanical aid."[24] After some comic false starts, Charlie played the first half of the melody. The crowd applauded. Charlie played the remaining melody. The crowd again applauded. Charlie then replayed the melody over twice as fast, each note receiving a crisp, staccato attack. The crowd applauded at length for his virtuosic rendition of "God Save the Queen."

Mark later explained two ways of blowing a note, by the mouth and by the nose. "Inasmuch as a seal puts his mouth around a horn when he blows by the former method, for fast choruses we teach him merely to exhale through his nose as it is much swifter."[25]

Monty the Baby Sea Lion

At the time, the orthodoxy in the scientific community was that California sea lions would not breed in captivity. However, that did not stop Mark Huling from trying to breed at his quarters in Kingston, New York. He was well aware of the difficulty, stating,

> "During all the years that my brothers and I have been training and performing with seals, we'd never so much as heard of seals breeding in such close quarters and so never gave the idea much thought…From all we could learn by talking with others who had experience with show seals we got little encouragement. It seemed to be the general opinion that a baby seal among trouping water dogs was one of those things that happened every hundred years."[26]

Mark tried the long shot during the 1925-1926 off-season. Neptune courted Lady. Before long, Lady was expecting. When Mark resumed with Ringling-Barnum the following spring, along went expectant Lady. After five weeks at Madison Square Garden, the circus began its six-month rail route with stops in the northeastern United States before heading to Canada. Stowed aboard was Lady. The big day came on June 22 when the circus was in Montreal. Mark's helper shouted that the little one had arrived.[27]

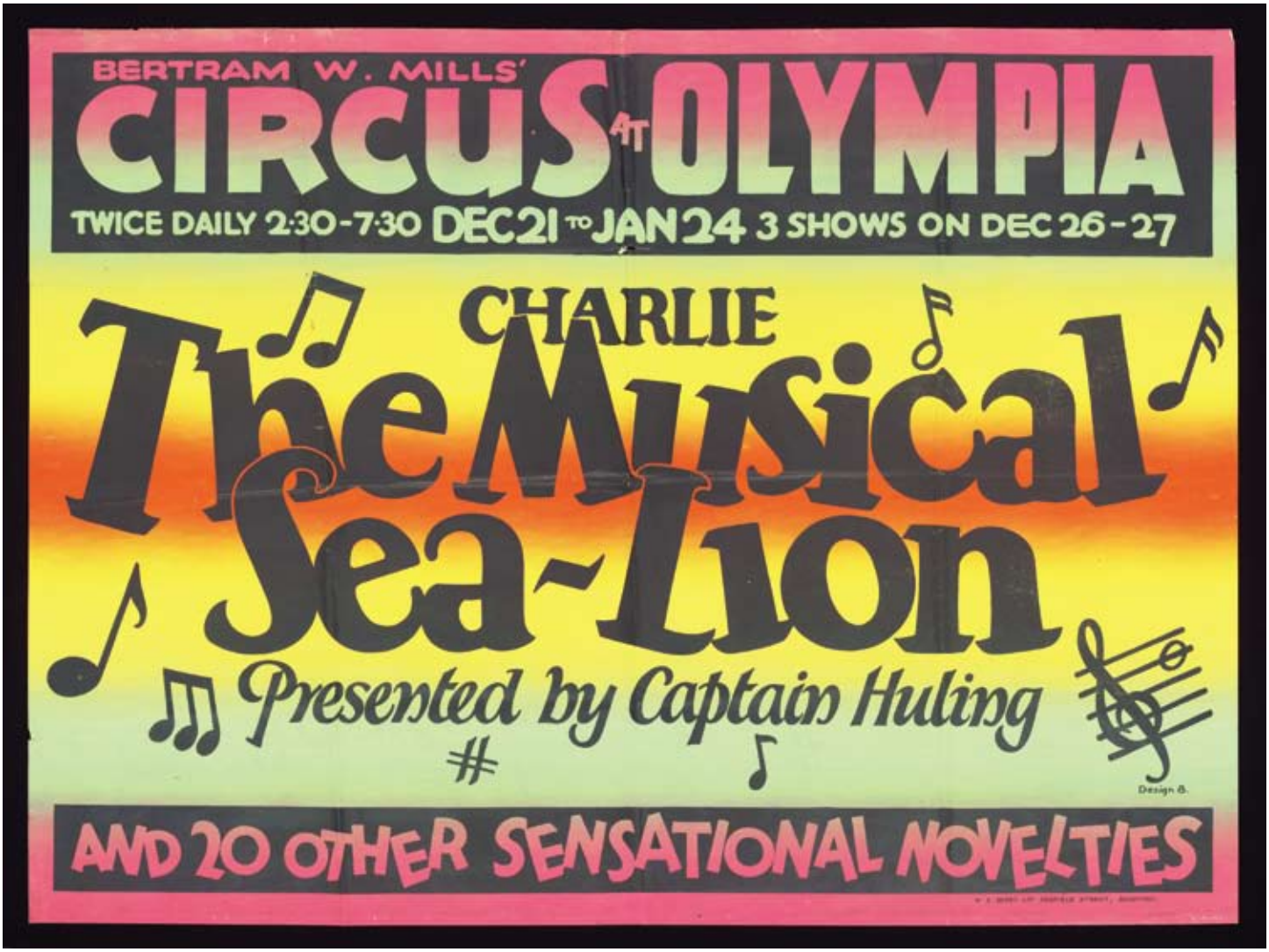
Mark named the male pup Montreal, or Monty, for short. He later recalled the reaction of his circus comrades: "Excitement! Why there couldn't have been more over a baby at the White House. I suppose I was as bad as anybody else."[28]

Monty's first photo session was a month later during a nine-day stop in Chicago. The cameraman was noted circus photographer Harry Atwell. Monty posed outside. Joining him was seven-year-old Glenn Graves, the son of the show's property boss, often looked after by his godmother Lillian Leitzel. Mark said that "Monty stood for a couple of snaps and then decided he better be getting back to his mother. He dragged Glenn with all the strength of a fair-sized dog and though he couldn't see the den, pointed his nose straight for it."[29]

The author's great grandfather, Mark Huling, and his brother Frank presented their sea lions on Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey throughout the Roaring Twenties. Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

The identity of Monty's father is a whole other story. The Huling brothers appear to have engaged in some playful opportunism with the press to promote the male star sea lion of the moment. Mark initially told a reporter that Major was the father, as did Frank in a separate interview with the *Montreal Gazette*. But shortly after, Ray told an Ohio reporter that Charlie was the father, claiming that Charlie had never seen his son due to his touring schedule. Mark later told Edwin Norwood, the Ringling publicity director, that Neptune was the father, in what was the most detailed recounting of the story. Thus, it would seem that Monty's father was neither Major nor Charlie, but rather, Neptune.[30]

Monty eventually trained for the circus. He quickly became a talent and in the words of one journalist, had "as much promise as the great Charlie."[31] By the time he was three, Monty was doing a comedy routine, singing into a candlestick phone, calling up a fellow sea lion to come out and play ball.[32] Mark proudly boasted, "So far as I have informa-


BERTRAM W. MILLS'
CIRCUS AT OLYMPIA
TWICE DAILY 2:30-7:30 DEC 21 TO JAN 24 3 SHOWS ON DEC 26-27
CHARLIE
The Musical
Sea-Lion
Presented by Captain Huling
AND 20 OTHER SENSATIONAL NOVELTIES

During the winter holiday season of 1927-1928, Charlie, the musical sea lion, brought down the house with his rendition of "God Save the Queen" played on tin horns at Bertram Mills' Circus at Olympia in London. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

tion, he is the only [sea lion] ever to arrive and be brought up with a circus."[33]

Tragedy Strikes Twice

Throughout the Roaring Twenties, the Hulings were an attraction with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey year after year, though it was not without its difficulties. On September 28, 1920, the following dispatch from San Antonio, Texas, raced across the country: "Sixteen trained seals, valued at $18,000, belonging to the combined Ringling-Barnum circus, were found dead when their cage-tank was opened when the circus arrived here yesterday morning."[34] Through no fault of the Hulings, a mistake in train loading had separated the seals from their caretakers. At first, the Hulings believed that poisoned water in their tank was the cause of death. They later determined that the animals had been deprived of water during the hot trip from Waco to San Antonio. The Ringlings continued to pay the Hulings their salary and bought them new animals.

The Hulings retooled and were back with Ringling-Barnum the following year and every year after that, through 1928 – though that year brought troubles of a different sort. Biographer Richard Thomas wrote in his book *John Ringling, Circus Magnate and Art Patron:*

> "John Ringling decided that Mark Huling and his trained seals, a popular act of his circus, would be a profitable attraction on his St. Armand's Key, across the causeway from Sarasota, that winter. He had a building erected in which they were to live and present their act and made arrangements for a supply of a certain type of fish they were supposed to like. The act moved into the building but the seals refused to eat the fish provided... As his seals were unhappy at St. Armand's and as he was afraid [that] they would die of their self-imposed starvation, Huling packed up the troupe and returned, as quickly as possible, to Kingston, New York, his winter home."[35]

John Ringling docked Mark $500 from his first paycheck the next circus season. Ringling said the building on St. Armand's Key had cost him twice that, and Mark's "refusal to

Harry Atwell took this photograph of baby Monty and seven-year-old Glenn Graves in July 1926 when Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey was set up at Grant Park in Chicago. Monty was thought to be the first sea lion to be born on a circus in North America.

Gary Bohan, Jr. Collection

put on a show there had caused him to lose that amount,"[36] so he was charging him half. Mark finished his contracted season with Ringling, then gave his notice.

That next year, 1929, Sells-Floto signed Mark, advertising Major as "Huling's trained horse-riding seal, a remarkable example of training unequalled in the world."[37] America was thriving with prosperity and according to circus historian Fred Pfening III, "Sells-Floto enjoyed what was probably the most profitable season in American circus history."[38] John Ringling, not to be outdone, bought out Sells-Floto and four other circuses that September. Given that Sells-Floto was still on the road, Mark, ironically, was back on the Ringling payroll. He returned home following the circus season. But on December 13, a fire ravaged his seal quarters. Thirteen seals perished. Only two survived. Among the seals who died was Monty. Mark called the loss "a staggering blow." He added: "My first impulse, after recovering from the tragic fire, was to start at once rebuilding new quarters and buying up a fresh troupe of seals and beginning all over again from scratch." However, he soon had second thoughts and eventually came to his dispirited decision. "I decided to quit show business entirely."[39]

Seal College

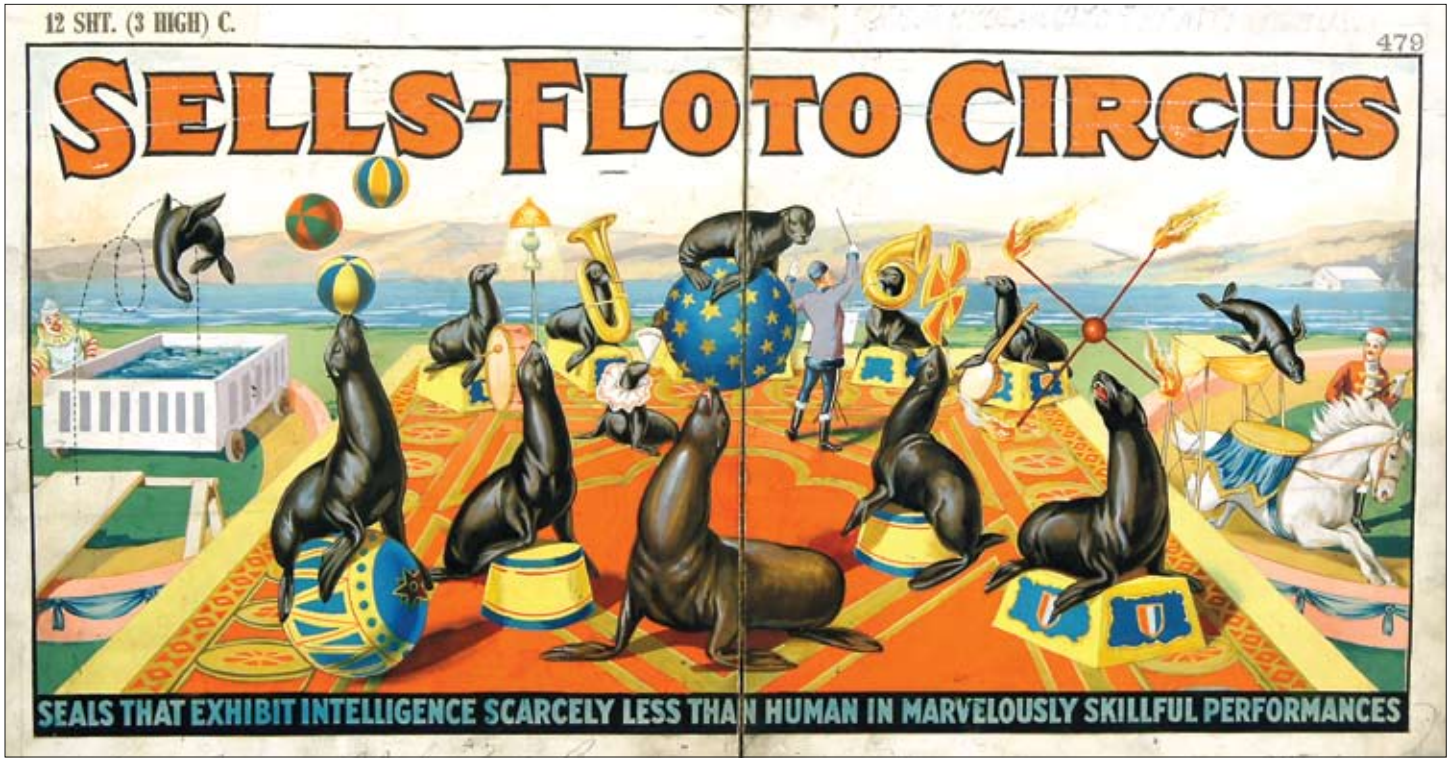
One of the two surviving sea lions was sold to parties in Germany. Mark Huling gave the other sea lion, Buddy, to his assistant, a man named Walter Jennier. Jennier had been born into a circus family and had established himself as a successful gymnast and aerialist before turning to training sea lions in the late 1920s under the tutelage of Mark Huling. Walter now branched off on his own with Buddy. Before long, they were headlining around the country. Walter worked with Sam B. Dill's Big 3 Ring Circus and Russell Bros. Circus. In both cases, Buddy was advertised as the "World's Greatest Performing Sea Lion."[40]

Meanwhile, the last of the three active Huling trainers, Ray, enjoyed critical acclaim with his standout sea lion Charlie. They played the most prestigious venues in the world – places like the London Palladium, the Palace Theater in Manhattan, and Germany's top variety theater, the Scala. They also played in Hollywood at Sid Grauman's Chinese Theater as part of a gala for the world-premiere screening of *I'm No Angel,* which starred Mae West as a circus performer. One reporter called the movie premiere "the most elaborate first-night opening in the history of the theater, with almost 30,000 people gathered around the boulevard to get a glimpse of the many stars."[41] Preceding the film was a circus stage prologue titled "Under the Big Top." Hollywood critic Louella Parsons wrote, "With a magnificent disregard for expense, Grauman imported the famous May Wirth and her family of equestrians, Escalante, tightrope specialist, and other equally effective acts." She added: "A highlight was Ray Huling and his trained seal, whose incredible antics kept the audience amazed and amused by turns."[42]

Charlie eventually took ill and spent his last days receiving medical care at the New York Aquarium. He died on April 14, 1938, whereupon Ray Huling retired. For the first time in over 30 years, there were no Huling seal trainers. But that soon changed.

After having left his seal-training career in 1929, Mark Huling owned and operated a successful nightclub in Kingston, New York, which he sold at a sizable profit right after Charlie died. Mark later recalled his next move: "With a pocketful of money, and for the first time in my life, idle moments for reminiscence, it is only natural that my thoughts again turned to seals. It was only a matter of a short time before the idea took material form."[43] Mark partnered with his former assistant Walter Jennier. The result was a facility touted as the world's largest institution where seals are trained and exhibited. On March 5, 1939, the facility opened its doors under the cleverly branded name of Seal College.[44]

Walter Jennier resumed working with Russell Bros. "Star Sea Lion of Circus Is a College Graduate," read one headline. "Buddy is a graduate cum laude of the world's only sea lion college."[45] With Walter on his circus route, Mark trained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SELLS-FLOTO CIRCUS
SEALS THAT EXHIBIT INTELLIGENCE SCARCELY LESS THAN HUMAN IN MARVELOUSLY SKILLFUL PERFORMANCES

After a long run with the gigantic Ringling circus, the Huling sea lions were featured on Sells-Floto during the single season of 1929. This original art was created to produce posters for that tour. Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

several Seal College freshmen, including one who would go on to become the most celebrated sea lion in the history of show business, a phenomenal prodigy by the name of Sharkey.

Sharkey the Seal

Sharkey rose to fame in 1940 for his Broadway role in the Rodgers and Hart musical *Higher and Higher.* His specialty was comically goosing the unsuspecting Jack Haley (the Tin Man in the *Wizard of Oz).* Two years later, Sharkey went to Hollywood, where he employed the same routine with Abbott and Costello in the movie *Pardon My Sarong.*

Mark Huling's partnership with Walter Jennier amicably ended shortly thereafter. For years, Walter remained a popular circus attraction with Buddy and other sea lions. Joining him was his wife Ethel and daughter Jo-Ann, the result of which was a combined trapeze-animal act. Also of note: Walter did a trick with Buddy lying on his back and his flipper leveled, on which Walter did a handstand, balancing on Buddy's flippers.

Mark Huling stayed on as the owner of Seal College. Returning to Ringling-Barnum was not an option. When he left after their 1928 season, he was replaced by the Tiebor family, colleagues from Tonawanda, New York, who stayed with Ringling into the 1950s. Mark, however, never strayed far from his circus roots.

Sharkey was a perennial summer attraction at Steel Pier in Atlantic City, where he performed in a grandstand show called "Water Circus," doing his specialty: hurdling a four-foot-high pole. Steel Pier owner George Hamid had long known the Hulings. His prior agency, Wirth and Hamid, Inc., represented "Huling's Sea Lions: A Troupe of Animals That Are Unsurpassed in Sagacity and Alacrity – The greatest of all amphibian actors, performing the same original and unexcelled tricks that they performed with the Barnum-Bailey and Ringling Brothers Circus, with whom they have been featured for many years."[46]

During World War II, Sharkey often performed at theater palaces, including a highly publicized stint in Indianapolis called "Under the Big Top." The *Indianapolis Star* reviewed the exhibition in an article "No Pink Lemonade, But Circus with Real Clowns at Keith's" noting that "Sharkey the Seal is the not-too-modest star of the show."[47] *Variety* wrote that the "top spot on the bill is accorded Sharkey the Seal, who earns his honors."[48]

In June 1945, shortly after Nazi Germany surrendered, Sharkey participated in a 30-act circus fundraiser sponsored by the Newark American Legion. Proceeds went to rehabilitation efforts for returning servicemen and servicewomen. Circus bandleader Joe Basile and his band provided music for the twice-daily circus shows. The *Montclair Times* wrote that the event "is attracting huge crowds" and "audiences are particularly applauding Sharkey."[49]

In November 1945, just after the end of World War II, Mark and Sharkey worked a month in Texas with the Moslah Temple Shrine Circus. The three-ring, 24-act exhibition featured leading circus performers, including headliner Clyde Beatty with his lions and tigers. Sharkey came billed as the "Super Seal of All Time."[50] While there, Sharkey made appearances to promote sales at Victory Bond rallies to help pay for a war that had come at unprecedented cost. The *Fort Worth Telegram* ran headlines like "Trained Seal Shows Off

Ray Huling presented his sea lion Charlie, named after the Ringling boss, at the Scala Theater in Berlin, Germany (pictured here) and other leading venues around the world.

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Some New Tricks to Increase His Bond Sales: Sharkey Struts His Stuff" and "Sharkey, Circus Seal, Out To Beat Bond Sales Record."[51] Sharkey "sold" over $375,000 in bonds (in today's dollars).

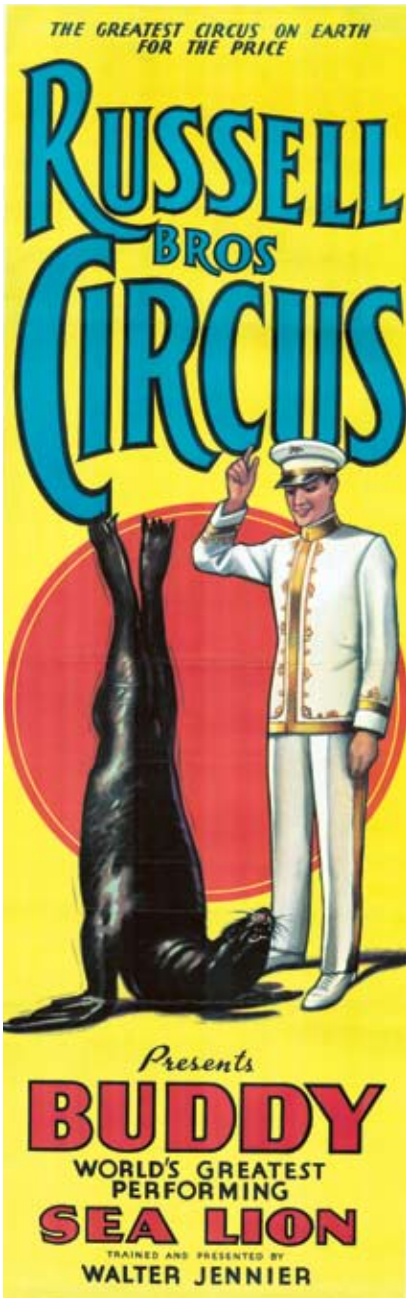
Mark and Sharkey thrived in the postwar years. Sharkey starred in Radio City Christmas Spectaculars and played the country's top theaters. And when the popularity of television exploded in the late 1940s, Sharkey become a TV mainstay. He appeared on virtually all of the iconic variety shows of early television, including with Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, Arthur Godfrey, Bob Hope and Ed Sullivan.

Jumbo was another Huling-trained sea lion who achieved success during the 1940s. His wartime circus resume included performances with a Ringling Bros. patriotic show titled Spangles that played at Madison Square Garden in the summer of 1943.[52] After the war, Jumbo spent part of the 1949 season with the Hamid-Morton Circus. Their route included a stop in Hartford in what was the first outdoor circus there since the tragic big-top fire five years earlier. In its review of the Hamid-Morton show, *The Billboard* wrote that "All newspapers in the Hartford area co-operated…on publicity, with no publication mentioning in print anything in reference to the 1944 Ringling circus fire."[53] That same article reported that Jumbo "drew heavy applause."

But the era of Huling-trained sea lions was coming to a close. Mark's brother Frank had died in 1935 and his other brother Ray died in 1949. When Mark died two years later, his passing was commemorated by obituaries nationwide, including in the *New York Times, Variety,* and the Associated Press.[54] One paper referred to him as "the greatest of all sea lion trainers."[55] The book was now closed on the three Huling brothers as trainers and performers. All that remained of their trained seals was Mark's two last performing animals, Sharkey and another named Sandy.

The Final Years

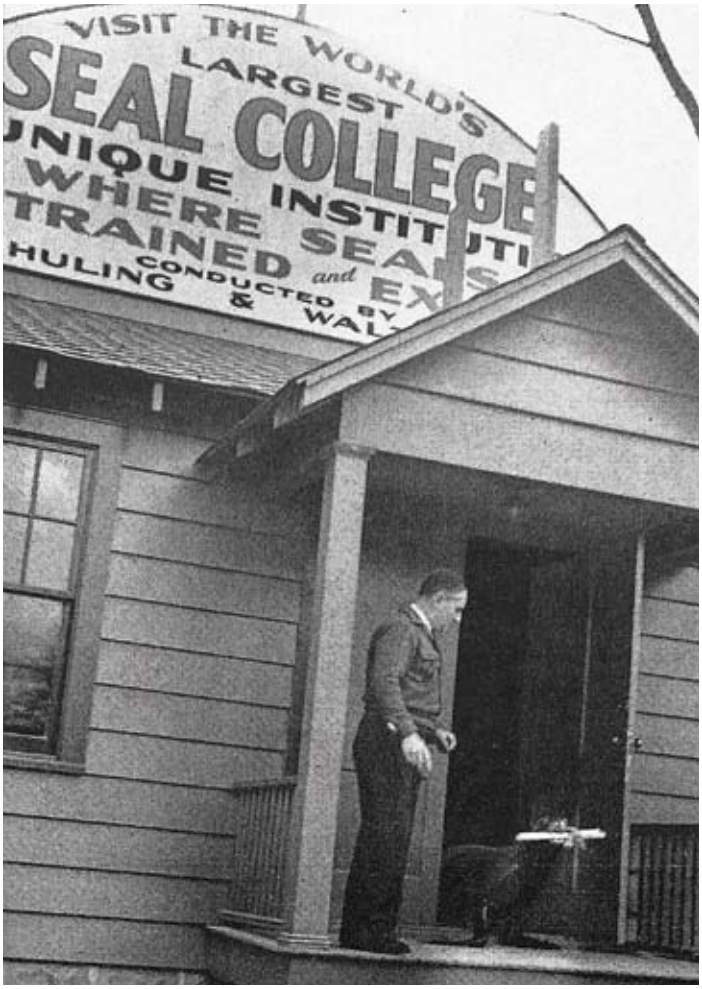
Two weeks after Mark's death, one of his assistants and Sandy appeared on a new circus-themed children's television show called *Big Top.* That same month, another of Mark's assistants and Sharkey appeared on a similar television show called *Super Circus.* During much of the 1950s, the two weekly shows aired live and were broadcast nationally. Both received Emmy nominations for Best Children's Program. Over the years, Sharkey made multiple appearances on both programs. During *Big Top's* fifth anniversary show, he balanced a beach ball that was imprinted "Big Top 5 Years Old"; and on an episode of *Super Circus* he costarred with baseball legend Jackie Robinson.



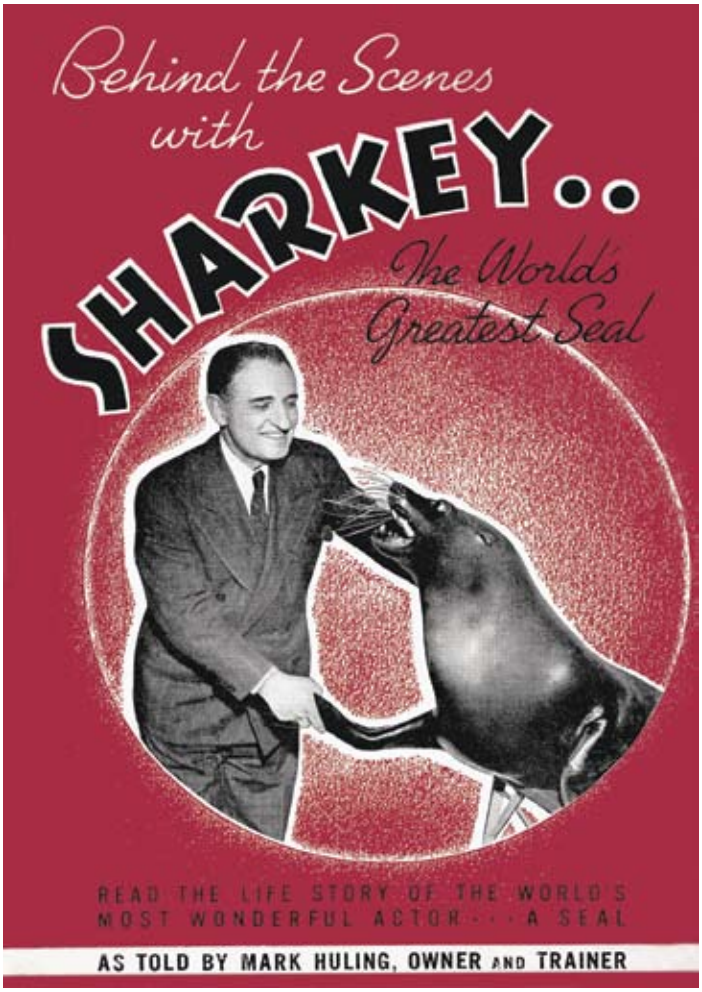
Buddy was one of only two seals that survived the December 1929 fire. Mark Huling gave the highly talented sea lion to his assistant, Walter Jennier, who had toured with him during the late 1920s.

Chris Berry Collection

While the rise of television popularity provided great exposure, it also brought a sea change in cultural norms. Before long, the small screen was dominating the entertainment world. Live in-person acts bore the brunt. George Hamid put it like this: "While variety and circus acts will survive on the fairgrounds as long as there are children, there must be a growing acceptance of tele-



Mark Huling at Seal College, Kingston, New York, 1939.
Alfred Weiss photograph


Behind the Scenes
with
SHARKEY..
The World's
Greatest Seal
READ THE LIFE STORY OF THE WORLD'S
MOST WONDERFUL ACTOR . . . A SEAL
AS TOLD BY MARK HULING, OWNER AND TRAINER

Sharkey was indeed a legendary sea lion and wonderful actor. Gary Bohan, Jr. Collection

vision and a willingness to live with it."[56]

Seal College steadily saw its workload decline. In addition, Sharkey was showing his age. The final circus performance by a Huling-trained seal was in November 1957 in Fort Worth at the Moslah Temple Shrine Circus. The last known performance whatsoever by a Huling-trained seal was in April 1958 when Sandy appeared on the television show *Captain Kangaroo.*

Sharkey died a month later and Seal College closed its doors. So ended the era of Huling-trained sea lions, an era that spanned the heyday of tented rail-traveling circuses, two World Wars and the Great Depression. An era during which Frank, Mark and Ray Huling – along with their many assistants and talented sea lions – delighted circus audiences around the world, bringing laughs and wonderment to men, women and children of all ages. BW

Endnotes

1. Mark Huling, *Behind the Scenes with Sharkey, The World's Greatest Seal,* c.1945 (a 16-page un-paginated booklet). For clarity, Mark's third-person self-references have been adapted to read in the first person.
2. "Capt. Adams on Trained Seals and Sea Lions," *New York Clipper,* Feb. 14, 1914.
3. Frank's status as Webb's manager is documented in Tonawanda city directories.
4. Mark Huling, op. cit.
5. "Seals and How They Are Trained: 'Kindness Wins' says Captain Huling," *Daily Herald* (Adelaide, Australia), July 11, 1916, p. 6.
6. Fred D. Pfening, Jr., "The Final Years: Adam Forepaugh and Sells Bros. Big United Shows," *Bandwagon,* July-Aug. 1995, p. 5. The article misidentifies Frank Huling as "Fred Huling," a carryover from newspaper notices that similarly misidentify him, perhaps due to a typo in the circus program.

About the Author

Gary Bohan, Jr. is the great-grandson of Mark Huling and the author of *Sharkey: When Sea Lions Were Stars of Show Business (1907–1958),* published in 2022 by SUNY Press. Bohan's book tells the story of Sharkey, a sea lion who shared the stage with practically every important performer of the first half of the 20th century – from Bob Hope to Ella Fitzgerald, from Broadway to Hollywood and beyond. Readers follow Sharkey and his flippered colleagues, with stops at the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus, vaudeville theaters and the legendary studios of early radio, movies and television.

7. "Wonderful Trained Seals: Capt. Huling Exhibits Two Troupes," *Pittsburgh Press,* May 5, 1912, p. 3.
8. "Trained Seals with Circus," *Hopkinsville Kentuckian,* Sept. 5, 1912, p. 3.
9. Wynn, "Ringling Brothers: Chicago, April 10," *Variety,* Apr. 13, 1912, p. 22.
10. Harry F. Rose, "Big Ringling Circus Acclaimed In Chicago," *The Player: The Official Organ of the White Rats Actors' Union of America and the Associated Actresses of America,* Apr. 11, 1913, pp. 3-4.
11. "Entertainments," *Australasian* (Melbourne), Nov. 13, 1915, p. 26.
12. "Wirth's Circus," *Colac Herald* (Victoria, Australia), Nov. 22, 1915, p. 2.
13. "Huling's Wonderful Seals," *Examiner* (Launceston, Tasmania), Dec. 10, 1915, p. 3.
14. *New Zealand Herald,* Mar. 22, 1916, p. 14.
15. *Sydney Morning Herald,* May 16, 1916.
16. Mark Valentine St Leon, *"Circus & Nation: A Critical Inquiry into Circus in Its Australian Setting, 1847-2006, from the Perspective of Society, Enterprise and Culture,"* (PhD Doctorate thesis, University of Sydney, 2006), p. 128.
17. "How They Trained California Sea Lions to Hunt U-Boats," *Oregon Sunday Journal* (London: Star Company), May 18, 1919. This reference also applies to the quotes in the following paragraph.
18. Joseph Woodward figured prominently during the early days of sea lion training, including in the U.S. Adam Forepaugh & Sells Bros. Big United Shows featured Woodward sea lions from 1896-1900. Prior to that, Joseph and his brother Fred were with Sells Bros.
19. *The Circus Colossal: Magazine and Daily Review of the Combined Ringling Brothers Circus and Barnum & Bailey Show,* 1919.
20. *The Billboard,* June 12, 1926, p. 112.
21. Ibee, "Ringling-B. & B. Circus, *Variety,* Apr. 23, 1927, p. 57.
22. Edwin P. Norwood, *The Circus Menagerie,* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1929), pp. 82–83.
23. *Bertram Mills Circus: At Olympia, London, Recorded during Actual Performance,* Edison Bell Records, A.5639, 78-rpm recording.
24. Ibid.
25. "College for Seals," *Popular Mechanics,* Jan. 1940, p. 85.
26. Norwood, op. cit., pp. 76–77.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid. p. 81.
30. Sources for this paragraph include: "'Monty's Parents Live in Kingston," *Daily Freeman* (Kingston, New York), July 21, 1926; "Baby Seal 'Joins Up" with Circus," *The Gazette* (Montreal), June 22, 1926, p. 6; *Dayton Daily News,* Dec. 30, 1926, p. 30; and Edwin P. Norwood, *The Circus Menagerie, op. cit., Chapter VIII: The Baby Sea Lion* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1929).
31. "13 Seals Owned by Huling Bros. Die in Fire," *Daily Freeman,* Dec. 14, 1929, p. 1.
32. *Seals – Outtakes. Training,* film, Fox Movietone News, story pp. 2-98, filmed on location at Kingston, New York, performed by Mark Huling and Monty, Mar. 11, 1929, Moving Images Research Collection, University of South Carolina.
33. Norwood, op. cit. p. 76.
34. "Ringling Seals Are Dead," *Coffeyville Daily Journal* (Kansas), Sept. 28, 1920, p. 5.
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39. Mark Huling, op. cit. All quoted material within the paragraph is from this source.
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52. A Sept. 8, 1943 article titled "Bath Fair" in the *Mansfield Advertiser* (Pennsylvania) reported that "Jumbo, a trained seal... with the Ringling Spangles Show... recently closed a successful engagement at Madison Square Garden, New York."
53. "H-M, Outdoors Sans Tent, Gets Crowds in Hartford," *The Billboard,* July 2, 1949, p. 68.
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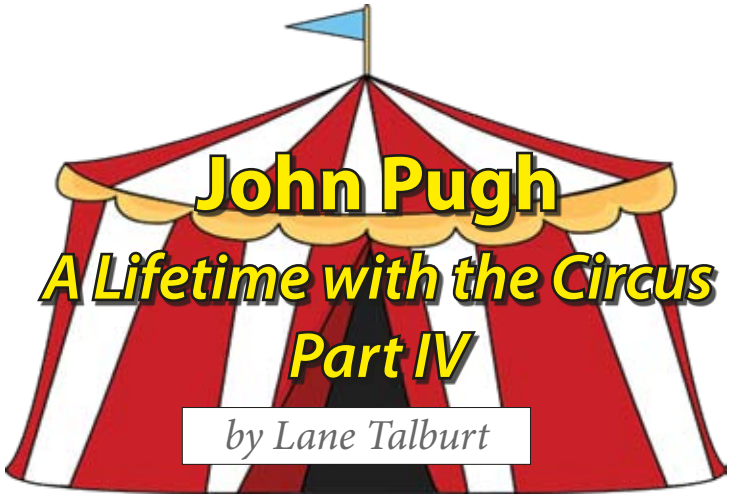
Jumbo and Mark Huling's assistant Lew Bohan on stage at Steel Pier in Atlantic City. The huge sea lion had been a popular feature of the Spangles circus in 1943.

Gary Bohan, Jr. Collection



John Pugh
A Lifetime with the Circus
Part IV

by Lane Talburt

A pre-Easter snowstorm, accompanied by gunfire, and tornadic winds crushing the big top – with those two separate events, Mother Nature played havoc with the 1967 and 1968 tours of Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus.

In the first instance, a surprise ten-inch snowfall in New York City forced circus performers, workingmen and animals to take refuge inside the Long Island arena prior to the 1967 season opener. Snow was not the major obstacle threatening the March 23 debut, however. Instead, it was the wounding of a worker accused of stealing porkchops off the side show boss canvasman's grill. Lacking discovery of the gun used in the shooting, police would nix the first show.

The July 9, 1968, freakish "skip tornado" leveled the Beatty-Cole big top in Auburn, New York, trapping some 1,400 spectators and injuring scores – fortunately, none seriously. The new canvas tent and its cables, however, were cut into ribbons by firemen during the frantic rescue efforts.

In the aftermath of both weather-related events, the DeLand, Florida-based circus experienced costly layovers. The Commack arena snowfall resulted in an unprecedented three-week gap between the indoor date and the opening of the 1967 tented tour. Whereas the loss of the big top during the Auburn blowdown forced the show to bypass two cities and to set up for a rare three-day open-air stand at Buffalo.

And Johnny Pugh was the linchpin who kept the show moving throughout the troublesome incidents. Despite numerous additional performances lost to muddy, unplayable lots, the young manager guided the show's operations through two profitable tours. Along the way he also met his future wife, the twin daughter of an illusionist.

John Pugh was ever present during the set-up and operation of the Beatty-Cole enterprise. John Pugh Collection

On paper, Pugh reverts to second in command

The 1967 Beatty-Cole program, printed while John was spending his annual leave with family in London, downgraded the 27-year-old's title to manager (along with the returning Harry Anderson Jr.), with Frank Orman preempting him in the role of general manager. Pugh had bristled at Orman's return to his old duties toward the end of the previous season's tour. After all, Pugh had been McClosky's eyes-on-the-ground collaborator during Art Concello's unsuccessful attempt in 1966 to convert the traditional under-canvas show to indoor venues.

At Pugh's urging, McClosky had been able to persuade chief investor Jerry Collins to buy out Concello's shares, thus ending a takeover bid by the former Ringling executive.

With Orman back on duty, and with treasurer Edna Antes back in full charge of the office, the Beatty-Cole winter quarters in DeLand, became a beehive in preparation for the new season.

A combination of labor shortages, inclement weather and unsuitable lots would plague the self-proclaimed "World's Largest Circus" during the upcoming season, however, there were some bright spots too.

Beatty-Cole and its two smaller affiliates enjoyed perhaps the strongest routes of any tented enterprise at the time. Pugh attributed the efficient and profitable routing to circusdom's premiere general agent.

"Floyd King was probably the best booking agent that was ever alive," Pugh said.

> "He booked the three shows (Beatty-Cole, King Bros. and Sells & Grey). He had contracting agents out front, you know. We had sponsored dates most of the time, and Floyd set up the phone room for them. We had very few cold dates in those days."[1]

King conducted most of his negotiations from a hotel room in Miami. "He never traveled with the show. I'd ring him up [from the road] and say, 'Jesus, Floyd, why are play-

ing here?' He'd say, 'We've got to be somewhere on Wednesday, son.' "[2]

Snow, gunplay threatens 1967 opener

The snow-covered lot at Commack arena and the equally unexpected behind-the-scenes wounding of an employee threatened the Beatty-Cole outfit's opening performance.

The 11-day indoor stand gave the McClosky/Collins circus an important toehold into the lucrative New York metropolitan market in direct competition with Ringling's month-long stay in Madison Square Garden. It also gave Beatty-Cole a five-day advantage over its Ringling rival, whose contract locked it into the Tuesday following Easter for its New York debut.

The Beatty-Cole lease arrangement with the Suffolk County-owned facility was more flexible, allowing the circus a full week to set up and to rehearse before the initial performance.

Pugh returned from his annual family visit in England to oversee preparations. As in previous years, only the equipment, staff, performers and their trailers required to stage the indoor event were on site. Among exceptions was the new side show tent, erected for the first time. (The menagerie remained in DeLand pending start of the under-canvas tour.) "We had the sideshow, snake show, novelty joint and the office outside," Pugh recalled.[3]

All went well until the day before the first show. That's when ill weather intervened:

> "A late season snowstorm – unwanted except by kids with sleds and unpredicted by anyone, including the weatherman – dumped up to a foot of snow across the metropolitan area on the second day of spring yesterday (March 22)…It snarled auto traffic, slowed subways and hampered airline traffic.
>
> "Suburbanites, lulled like city dwellers by a weather forecast that said 'A few flurries likely,' awoke to find as much as nine inches of snow already piled on their lawns and driveways yesterday morning."[4]

Below-freezing temperatures also caught show people and animals unprepared. Reacting quickly, Pugh ordered all personnel to move indoors, mostly onto the show floor, which nominally hosted professional basketball and hockey games. "We moved the elephants in their trucks into the arena," Pugh said. All shared space with three rings and rigging.[5]

The snow accumulation threatened to collapse the side show top, forcing an emergency response. The sideshow top was new, measuring 70 feet long with three 30-foot sections.[6]

Pugh remembered the incident: "We put diesel fuel into 50-gallon drums and set fire to it so that the snow would melt off," Pugh said. "We were all choked up from the fumes. Finally, we had to take the tent down, and we busted one of the center poles dropping it." The banner line and stakes remained in place until the top could be repaired and raised on the second day of the engagement.[7]

Sideshow boss canvasman Edward "Gypsy Red" Maynard had encamped inside an arena doorway during the snowstorm so that he could keep his eyes on the exposed banner line. As the story goes, an inebriated worker stole porkchops that Red had been cooking on a grill. Red allegedly shot the worker and was arrested, but police were unable to locate the missing weapon. The wound apparently was not serious, but investigators held the show's opening hostage until recovery of the firearm.

In 1967, a surprise spring snowstorm dumped ten inches of heavy wet snow on the Beatty-Cole midway outside the Commack arena where the Long Island, New York performances were to be given. John Pugh Collection

That's when GM Orman approached Pugh for assistance. Both had known Maynard on the 1948 Cole Bros. rail circus – Orman was a manager and Johnny a ten-years-old trampoline performer.[8]

Pugh told Maynard, "The whole show is waiting on you, and they'll put us all out of work if you don't cop out to me."[9]

Red's resolve wilted, and he pointed to a nearby dumpster containing elephant dung and other waste. With the gun in the investigator's hands, the circus was cleared for the first performance.

Though the disposition of Maynard's case was unclear, Pugh said he received Christmas cards from the imprisoned

former employee for several years after the incident.[10]

Circus historian Tom Parkinson characterized Beatty-Cole's Commack episode as "snow on the ground but money in the wagon."[11]

Hoover, Williams and Cristiani return

For 1967 the circus had to find replacements for departing featured performers that Concello had brought on. These included equestrian director Trevor Bale and the daring single trapeze routine of his son, Elvin Bale. Trevor's three daughters, Gloria, Dawnita and Bonnie, returned to the rings to present well-received horse acts.

Among other returnees were three featured acts: Dave Hoover, in his second season as wild-animal trainer who opened each performance fighting lions and tigers; Rex Williams, who presented the show's herd of eleven elephants in all three rings and in the traditional standing long mount; and the Franconi riding troupe, spotlighting Lucio Cristiani's comedy routine.

Another veteran, Stu Miller, took over the side show management. "Stu had a lot of experience," Pugh said. "He could put a side show of attractions together in a day."

Pugh had fired a previous side show manager and his girlfriend whom he had caught rehashing tickets. The canned manager erupted at Pugh. " 'You've got no right to fire me.' I said, 'Call McCloskey and see what he says.' " The dismissal was upheld.[12]

Charles Schlarbaum played calliope on the side show and blew trumpet while directing the ten-piece band under the big top.

During the Commack engagement McClosky became fearful that the weather would be worse for scheduled northern dates and ordered a three-week layoff. In retrospect, "McClosky was mad himself for making that decision," since subsequent improving weather conditions would have made those postponed stands playable.[13]

The resulting hiatus sent top managers in Florida scrambling to find a holding site for the canvas show's equipment and personnel. They settled on the American Legion fairgrounds at Wilson, North Carolina. The big top canvas, tent poles and seat wagons were stored at an area tobacco warehouse. "We had a lot of seat wagons in those days," Pugh recalled. "We had the grandstand on one side, and three seat wagons in the back, two up front and two on the sides' "[14]

As the early weeks of the season passed, the uncertainty of job titles clouding relationships between Pugh and his mentor was resolved. Orman was promoted, and Pugh resumed his GM responsibilities. Since returning to the show, Pugh admitted that "I missed him (Orman). I was glad to have him come back, to tell the truth. He didn't come out of his trailer much and I would go sit with him with a problem, and he would tell me how to handle it."[15]

The two managers shared oversight duties at Wilson. Circus people, including a number of performers not part of the Long Island roster, spent idle hours at a miniature golf course or at the drive-in theater viewing the same movie for the duration. The outdoor fleet made a 120-mile jump to Petersburg for two days of set up and rehearsal for the initial under-canvas engagement on April 26.

Following the first tented performance in Petersburg, the circus spent five days in Newport News and Norfolk, and played dates in Richmond (May 1) and Alexandria (May 2). But a rain-soaked lot at Fort Belvoir forced the circus to blow the May 3 date. That was when McClosky, who had recently joined the show, returned to his home and circus office complex in Winter Park, Florida. But trouble followed the circus on the jump on the expressway circling Washington, D.C. enroute to Annapolis, Maryland.

John Pugh is seen directing the setup of the circus at Liberty Bell Park in Philadelphia in 1967. J. Kurt Spence photograph

"The 24-hour man was not fully prepared to arrow it all out, and he forgot to put arrows at the exit onto U.S. Highway 50 to Annapolis and Washington, D.C. The drivers that we had were new, so I spent half the night rounding up trucks."[16] Unable to contact the 24-hour man, who was already on the Annapolis lot, John said he stepped in to redirect the scattered vehicles.

Despite losing several days' attendance to rain at Philadelphia, the circus did good business during its May 20-30 stand on a new lot at Liberty Bell Park with Amusements of America as its carnival partner at the front of the circus lot.

Pugh said McClosky made a tradition of visiting the show yearly in Philadelphia, traveling there by rail. "He loved the train; he was scared of flying, to tell the truth." During his stay there "he would go down to the meat market and buy a side of beef. He would have a butcher cut it into steaks and grind down anything else. He'd have it iced down with dry ice and take it back with him to Florida." From there McClosky shipped the meat to Walkers Cay in the Bahamas where he spent summers on his yacht.

Of greater significance, a financial incentive may have attracted McClosky to the City of Brotherly Love. During one of his annual visits, the managing director dispatched

Pugh to the carnival midway to pick up a packet containing $25,000. "He normally collected it, but he had an argument with [carnival management]," Pugh explained.[17] "They knew we were going to be there for ten days, and they took care of McClosky pretty good."[18]

From the mid-Atlantic and Northeast regions, the circus migrated to familiar cities and towns in the Midwest. Regardless of where the show was playing, there was a constant need to fill gaps in the Beatty-Cole workforce which accounted for the show's on-the-go hiring practices.

Missed dates and their impact on the bottom line also were inherent with itinerant "mud" shows. And loss of the scheduled July 31 stand in Miami Valley, Ohio due to more than an inch of rain the prior night was no exception. In a local interview Pugh's reaction to the unplayable lot was typical:

> "The old circus boss was barking out pull-out order when the half-serious question was asked: 'What about the old tradition that the show must go on?'
>
> " 'Go on?' he muttered. 'We're goin' on all right – goin' on to Springfield.'
>
> "Circus men were quick to emphasize that rain hardly ever stops a show – providing that the tents are already up. Pugh said the circus always plays over 220 days out of the year with usually only [about] two cancellations due to weather...
>
> "When daylight came this morning teams of elephants had to be used to pull out the heavy tractor-trailer rigs whose wheels spun helplessly."[19]

John Pugh and Frank McClosky consulted during a stroll under the big top. McClosky, who was one of the co-owners of the Clyde Beatty Cole Bros. Circus, spent very little time with the show in 1967 and 1968. J. Kurt Spence photograph

Alone in the dark with big cats

Dave Hoover became a circus fan favorite and remained a stalwart on the show until his final Beatty-Cole performance in 1995. The nature of his act also made him a prime candidate for media interviews and photos. The wild animal trainer related a harrowing incident to an Iowa scribe in September:

> "With chilling abruptness the lights faded out and Dave Hoover, lion tamer with the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus, found himself alone in utter darkness with a dozen savage beasts he couldn't see.
>
> " 'It was the longest two minutes in my life before I finally got the last animal out of the cage,' admits the star of the show which will be in Davenport today [September 8] for two performances at the levee showgrounds.
>
> "Hoover's close call occurred in Rockford IL, this Tuesday [September 5] when someone forgot to provide enough fuel for the generator supplying lights inside the big top and didn't hook up an emergency light over the center ring cage where Hoover matches wits and courage with the big cats.
>
> " 'I was almost to the end of the act when the lights went out. What a feeling to be alone in there, knowing they could see me but I couldn't see them. A little bit of light seeped in from the signs out front, just enough to silhouette the tiger. I could feel lions brushing by me in the darkness.
>
> " 'I had to stay in the cage because if I tried to open the door to get out there was a possibility one of the lions or tigers would have slipped into the audience. My wife controls the door into the animals' cages and I kept shouting, 'Door, door, door!'
>
> " 'Luckily we were nearly to the end of the act and the cats went into their cages and I didn't get a scratch. But I know they knew I wasn't in control,' Hoover grins, tilting the cigar that has become his trademark at a jaunty angle.
>
> " 'I'm scared with the lights on, but with them off I was terrified. I make no bones about being chicken.' "[20]

Fortunately, injuries to circus patrons and troupers were likewise avoided during a freak storm that interrupted the matinee on September 21 at Greenwood, Mississippi. "Tornadic wind swayed the big three-ring tent and temporary panic gripped that capacity crowd," as a Greenwood reporter who witnessed the afternoon performance wrote:

> "The show was well in progress when the unexpected winds hit, 'swinging' a section of the tent and almost lifting the top. Following the first gust,

> a large number in attendance began running out the exits…Workers scurried around replacing the poles…[21]

Despite the unexpected mishaps of the 1967 tour, the Beatty-Cole outfit was deemed "best of the lot" among competing circuses by circus historian Parkinson. "In August

The timeless process of spreading the canvas of the "World's Largest Circus" was photographed in Ann Arbor, Michigan. *Ann Arbor News*

the Beatty show told of having played to seven turnaways at Buffalo. It's Philadelphia stand, using a new lot, had been powerful. At Milwaukee the show had a $56,000 advance."[22]

Confirming widely circulating rumors in the circus world, a consortium of investors headed by Irvin Feld formally took possession of *The Greatest Show on Earth* on November 12 in signing ceremonies at the coliseum in Rome.

The change of ownership doomed Art Concello's plans to replace the Big One at the new Madison Square Garden and other Garden-owned buildings in 1968 with an arena circus of his own making. Instead, Concello spent most of 1967 putting together and touring with a cultural exchange circus in Russia, and the lackluster turnout in the United States brought the circus to a premature closing.

Beatty-Cole went into winter quarters at DeLand after completing a successful tour just short of 12,000 miles on November 7 at Orlando. Almost immediately, Harry Anderson Jr. turned in his resignation as manager. "Harry and I were good buddies," Pugh said. One of his primary responsibilities was to oversee the show's midway operations. Anderson apparently was still smarting over accusations that his father's influence got him the managerial position. Harry Anderson, Sr. operated Enquirer Printing, a major vendor for posters and other promotional materials used by numerous shows, Beatty-Cole among them.

"We had a grease joint on the show, a fold-out semi under an awning which served hamburgers and hot dogs and all that kind of stuff. Harry got angry when the guy told him, 'You should be in your office, your father's office, sharpening pencils.'"[23]

In the season's closing week, Ringling executive Bob Dover introduced John Pugh to his future bride, Brigitte Hodis, when Beatty-Cole had played Sarasota on November 2. Brigitte, her twin sister Jutta, and their parents were contracted as a new center-ring act – Ferry Forst Illusions – for the show's 1968 edition. "Bob knew me because of my dad and introduced me." Looking back, John described their initial brief encounter tersely: "Yeah. I got introduced to her, and she didn't give me the time of day," he laughed.[24]

Pugh welcomes new act, faces big top blowdown

As a featured act on the 1968 edition of the "World's Largest Circus," the Ferry Forst ensemble bamboozled audiences with their magic stunts from day one at Commack arena. The season opener from April 7 through the 21st was four days longer than the previous year's stint.

Coming off its extended Long Island stand, the Beatty-Cole aggregation began its rigorous under-canvas tour with an overnight jump to a big top already in the air at Elizabeth, New Jersey. From there the nomadic organization dipped south to the Virginia Tidewater area, playing a return engagement at Petersburg on May 7. A local newspaper review heaped praise on the one-finger stand of Lothar (Gayer). "There's something about Lothar's act that sticks in your mind years afterward, and you remember him no matter how many equilibrists you've seen… Another of the best acts was that of Ferry Forst & Co."[25]

Originally from Austria, Ferry Forst (his real name was Franz Hodis) was aided in his ever-changing routines by his German wife Lillian, and twin siblings Brigitte and Jutta, who were born during an air raid in Berlin in 1944. The twins had been included in the family routines since they were four years old. In 1960 Ringling Bros. Circus brought the Forst family to America, where they entertained audiences for almost two decades before joining Beatty-Cole.

The foursome left circus audiences gasping in disbelief along the 1968 tour route. The reaction of an Allentown, Pennsylvania, scribe was repeated time and again:

> "It's the finale of [Ferry Forst's] performance that is the most enthralling. In it, he helps one of his lovely assistants into a 'cannon,' covers it with a piece of mesh, and 'fires' it with a thunderous roar and belch of smoke.

"A box, [base drum] which has hung suspended high in the air for the duration of the act, is then lowered by Forst to a platform. Surprisingly, the girl crawls out of the box. How did he do it? Several thousand Lehigh Valley residents who caught the performance are wondering the same thing."[26]

Circus historian Tim Tegge offered a simple explanation for the success of the spell-binding deception. "Twin daughters are the ultimate commodity for any magician, for obvious reasons," he said. "Brigitte was the daughter who entered the cannon in ring one, while Jutta occupied the drum over ring three. The girls were never allowed to be seen one hour before or after each performance, exiting from the arena or big top separately."[27]

"They were a class act," Pugh elaborated. "John Ringling North brought them over. When they were on the Ringling show, they stayed in hotels at all the dates. One had to stay inside when the other went to eat."[28]

Assistant manager Edward "Ned" Toth, Jr. (Frank McClosky's nephew), caught Jutta's eyes in the backyard and schemed to invite her out. "Ned started dating Jutta but her dad would never let one girl go alone without the other, Pugh explained. "Finally, toward the end of the season Ned asked me to 'come along, at least' so that we'd be on a double date. That's how I started dating Brigitte."[29]

Left to Right in this Beatty-Cole publicity photograph are Jutta Forst, clown Jimmy James and Jutta's twin sister Brigitte who would be the future Mrs. John Pugh.

Clyde Beatty Cole Bros.

But Pugh had little time to concentrate on his personal life. Keeping the show on the move and performances on time occupied most of his waking hours. The threat of rain-soaked lots was a constant reminder that Beatty-Cole was indeed at the mercy of severe weather.

Several weeks in advance of the tented outfit's major date at Philadelphia, the new owner of America's largest indoor circus, Irvin Feld, aimed a verbal dart at his unnamed rival's shortcomings. "We don't have any more worries about bad weather, uncomfortable seats, locations," Irvin Feld declared during a May 9 interview. "These buildings are conducive to everybody really enjoying themselves."[30]

Ringling Bros. played the Spectrum from May 29 through June 9. Beatty-Cole, under Shrine auspices, got a head start, shared the Liberty Bell trotting track from May 21 through June 2 with Amusements of America carnival. Circus aficionado/author Parkinson described the outcome of the tented stand: "Advance was good but rains were long. But then the weekend weather cleared and crowds were big…On Saturday, June 1, Beatty-Cole played to more people than R-B."[31]

"Whoof! The tent went down"

Rain-saturated lots forced the circus to bypass Amsterdam, New York, on June 12, and New Bedford, Massachusetts, on June 27. Just one day before the show's most disastrous weather-related incident in upstate New York on July 9, "rain also caused the circus trouble at its previous stop in Utica [on July 8]," the Associated Press reported. "The 300 employees were forced to switch sites as the wet ground would not hold the tent's stakes."[32]

John Pugh's memories of the July 9 big top blowdown in Auburn, New York, remained vivid more than a half century later. The show was set up on a rainy but playable lot in a city park just off Owasso Lake in the Finger Lake region. In the following reconstruction of events, Pugh's comments are intermixed with conflicting wire service reports, particularly relating to estimates of crowd size and injuries.

PUGH: "We had thunderstorms during the evening show – you know, thunder and rain, but there was no indication that there was anything out there.[33]

"We had, like, 2,500 people in the tent. I was walking down the long side of the tent – that's where the main grandstand was – toward the backyard. What they called a skip tornado jumped (across the lake) and unfortunately it landed on us."[34]

AP: "The 150 by 300-foot tent was lifted from its moorings…during an electrical storm that deposited 2.98 inches of rain in less than three hours. About 2,000 spectators and performers were in the tent and 1,400 of them were enveloped by the falling canvas just ten minutes before the scheduled final act…Eleven elephants had just completed their act and were out of the tent when the wind hit. Two elephants bolted but were rounded up later and caused no harm."[35]

UPI: "The circus elephants rumbled out of the spotlight to applause and the acrobats waited to dazzle the audience with heroics on the trapeze anchored high in the Big Top…The acrobats

never went on. Outside, the rain was so heavy that the sheriff 100 yards away could not see the circus tent…Lightning flashed and thunder boomed…A mighty gust lifted the huge canvas and the aluminum tent poles toppled like matchsticks."[36]

PUGH: "And then, whoof! The tent went up, then it went down. I could see all the trucks and trailers parked on the other side of the tent. You've got to remember in those days we had 50 quarter poles besides the big center poles. And when the center poles came down, they kind of draped over things. So, people had time to leave [their seats], but they didn't get out of the tent.[37]

AP: "John Pugh, circus manager, said that when he learned of the thunderstorm forecast in the afternoon, he arranged for the big top to be triple-staked instead of the usual two rows of short, heavy stakes to fasten the tent to the ground. The wind still whipped the tent off its aluminum poles and free of its heavy steel cables."[38]

UPI: "The circus tent that collapsed…had been inspected only hours earlier and met all state safety regulations, it was learned. A 60-by-50-foot sideshow tent also was blown down, but nobody was in it…Deputy John Scransky said the middle section of the tent seemed to lift then settle down slowly. Sheriff Sponable and some of his deputies ran to the tent when it went down. They went around lifting the canvas to let out the trapped and in some places they cut through the fabric to free them."[39]

PUGH: "The rescue crews came in, and they cut the tent to pieces. [They] destroyed a brand new tent."[40]

UPI: "Everybody was freed within 90 minutes, the sheriff said. 'It's amazing that nobody was killed,' Sponable said. 'When I first saw it going down, I just couldn't imagine there would be no casualties.'"[41]

AP: "Police said 85 of the…spectators were injured, but none critically…Of the injured, two hospitals admitted two dozen, hospital attaches said. Others were discharged or treated on the circus grounds."[42]

AP: "Circus people and others waded in ankle-deep mud for a massive clean up job…Awaiting the arrival of a tent to replace the wrecked Big Top, they worked around the clock, with the help of elephants, to roll up the canvas and collect debris. Clear skies helped…"[43]

AP: "The state labor department has exonerated the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros Circus of liability for the tent collapse…Norman Riggs, supervising inspector for the department's Syracuse district, said a complete investigation of the incident revealed that the circus had complied with all state regulations….The department is terming the collapse as 'an act of God'…Riggs said Weather Bureau officials reported that gusts of wind at the time the tent collapsed were recorded at 46 miles an hour. Pugh said the tent could withstand winds of up to 65 miles an hour, indicating that the velocity of the wind was much higher than recorded."[44]

Pugh explained that many attendees were able to flee through the small marquee tent which remained standing. The high wire act was over Ring 1. "We saved a lot of people due to the fact that we anchored the high wire to the trucks, and the high wire stayed up. Basically, that held up a section of the tent.

"The firemen cut all the cables to get the people out. It ruined a brand new tent [raised for the first time at Philadelphia]. We junked the tent. It was cut to pieces and there were cut cables all over the place," he added. "We loaded the tent onto the spool truck. And then they unrolled it at the next town so we could see what the damage was."[45]

Chicago Tribune

THE WORLD'S GREATEST NEWSPAPER

SPORTS FINAL

WEDNESDAY, JULY 10, 1968

CIRCUS TENT FALLS ON 1,400

Vote on U.S. Phone Strike

Big Top Hit by Wind; 80 Are Injured

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MAYS SCORES IN 1ST; BEATS A.L. STARS, 1-0

The Beatty-Cole big top suffered a disastrous blowdown in Auburn, New York on July 9, 1968. The tent had to be replaced with the tent used the prior season that was retrieved from storage at the winter quarters in DeLand, Florida.

A replacement big top used during the previous season was retrieved from the tent house at winter quarters and the delivery to upstate New York in an expedited timeframe.

Bypassing booked dates at Rochester and Niagara Falls, the Beatty-Cole aggregation arrived in Buffalo for a three-day weekend engagement (July 12-14). The old tent was delivered there, but not soon enough to be raised. Instead, Pugh said, "We open-aired the show. We just put up the main entrance and side walls."

With the exception of a damaged aerial platform that prohibited the high wire act, the circus put on complete performances under clear skies throughout the Buffalo engagement. The replacement canvas was raised at the next town and for the remainder of the tour.[46]

Almost a mirror image of the Beatty-Cole collapse occurred one week later at a tented rock-n-roll concert in Milwaukee, where some 2,800 teens were gathered. As UPI reported, "Witnesses said the poles were uprooted and beams and canvas tumbled on about half the audience….No one was seriously injured."[47]

As Pugh reminded an audience of circus fans decades later:

> "The one thing you've always got to think of is you can always build that big top again. But if you get somebody hurt in that tent, I hope there's enough fuel in my boat to get me to the islands (laugh). I'm going to lose everything I've got... The public is somebody you have to protect."[48]

After completing its dates in the Midwest and South, the Beatty-Cole nomads ended the 1968 season on November 4 at Orlando, having covered 11,124 miles. The aging Floyd King's title was changed to "consultant," with Joe McMahon, a veteran on Oklahoma-based Al G. Kelly & Miller Bros, assuming the duties of general agent. Bw

Acknowledgements

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The next installment of the John Pugh story will appear in Bandwagon later this year.

Endnotes

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Circus World Museum, Wisconsin Historical Society

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